

Vermont village marries rustic and relaxed

By Clare Innes
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BROOKFIELD, Vt. — This time of year, it seems as though you have landed in the middle of nowhere when you roll into Pond Village, a tiny township of Brookfield. In warm weather, the famous floating bridge is much like a living Norman Rockwell scene: Locals swim and fish in Sunset Lake or plunge into thick novels along the shore.

When winter lays a quilt of snow over the scene, the to-do list changes: Curl up with a book in front of the fire; click into cross-country skis or snowshoes and disappear into the trees. Discover the least-direct route to any of dozens of things to do in the surrounding hills.

At the Green Trails Inn, owner Jane Doerfer — cook, travel maven, and coauthor with Roger Berkowitz of “The New Legal Sea Foods Cookbook” (Broadway, 2003) — makes it all too easy to while away the day nibbling fresh-baked delectables and enjoying exquisitely rambling conversation.

Since purchasing the 1840s-era farmhouse last winter, Doerfer has fine-tuned its charming blend of rustic elegance. The handmade mattresses and downy quilts make it nearly impossible to meet early morning ambitions. And once you spend any amount of time meeting the neighbors, the reasons to stay right here in the village begin to eclipse reasons to explore farther afield.

“That’s what’s so wonderful about these Vermont enclaves,” says Doerfer. “Scratch the surface and you’ll find so much going on.”

Visit Nina Gaby’s studio-gallery, featuring works from local and national artists, and get a rundown on artisans nearby who are worth a visit.

At the Brookfield Free Public Library, find out about the town’s history from Florence Barnum and her husband, Chuck. Founded in 1791, the library helped establish the area as a creative and intellectual hot spot.

Next door, get the scoop on the best local ski trails from Ed Koren, whose shaggy characters you have probably seen for years in *The New Yorker* and a handful of children’s books (and in “Thelonus Monster’s Sky-High Fly Pie” by Judy Sierra, coming out in May). Koren and his wife, Curtis, have been here nearly 30 years and savor the active community life.

“Community is Vermont’s strong suit,” Ed says. “That’s why people come here.”

“You go to the skating and house-to-house cross-country ski parties to meet people you wouldn’t otherwise see around here,” says Curtis.

You may have come to this peaceful spot to spend the weekend doing as little as possible, but as the sun climbs higher in the sky, you will probably enjoy a trip to the cov-



CLARE INNES FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

An Icelandic horse relishes winter in Brookfield, Vt.

ered bridges and a trail ride on an Icelandic horse.

Up the road in the Northfield area, you find five covered bridges, four clustered within a half mile of each other, two within a stone’s throw.

In Northfield Falls, at the intersection of Cox Brook and Dog River, lies the only spot in New England where you can look through one covered bridge and see another.

Continue up Cox Brook Road, a steep climb through woods, fields, and ravines. A right turn on Route 100B takes you the back way to Montpelier, the capital, where you find independent gift shops, bookstores, and cafes. But if you are saddled with an appointment, hang a left instead. In a couple of miles, North Fayston Road takes you to the Vermont Icelandic Horse Farm, which offers gorgeous, stocky equines with flowing manes and tails.

Iceland has not allowed horses to enter that country since around the 11th century, which has given Icelanders

about 1,000 years to breed the home herd for its smooth gait, nimbleness over treacherous terrain, and sweet disposition. Many horses in these paddocks came from Iceland.

A visitor from New York has horses of his own, so why has he driven all this way to ride these?

“It’s the gait,” he says with profound appreciation. “If you’ve ever ridden one, you’ll understand why.”

Sure enough, the even cadence of a slow trot translates through the saddle to a pleasant rolling motion, unlike the bone-jarring gait found in most horses available for trail rides. Urge your mount into the famous “tölt,” a canter known as the “flying gait,” and you find the smooth rhythm belies the surge of power coming from those legs.

The ride ranges over fields, dirt roads, and woodland trails. A soft snow sifts to the ground, filling the tracks of turkeys and rabbits. Just as our fingers and toes begin to tingle from the cold, we’re back at the horse farm barn, giving our steeds one last nuzzle before we tear ourselves away from these sweet creatures.

About four miles down Route 100 in Waitsfield, we find The Very Small Donut Company within a collection of shops called Village Square, where we acquire the perfect salve to the day’s chill: a steaming bowl of chili thick with shredded turkey, a hunk of fresh and yeasty bread, and a stack of Very Small Donuts. These tiny, addictive treats are slathered with Vermont maple frosting, and made fresh here in the shop, as is everything on the menu.

As daylight fades into dusk and the sun gives way to the moon, we return to the inn to hang our play clothes to dry for tomorrow. We head across the road to Ariel’s Restaurant, and Pond Village Pub. Our table at Ariel’s is an unexpected oasis of high-end dining in this quiet village.

Chef-owner Lee Duberman infuses an inventiveness into a world of culinary traditions. “My flavors tend to be intense and bright,” Duberman says while relaxing in the pub with her husband, Richard Fink, who has elevated his enological wisdom to a high art.

For the Basque-style wild striped bass with mussels on a bed of polenta, spiced with saffron and smoked paprika, Fink chooses a pino blanc from Vision Cellars. A Brancott Reserve pinot noir accompanies the potato, butternut squash, and Gorgonzola gnocchi with pine nuts and braised winter greens. Both are direct routes to heaven. Flan with guava sauce and pumpkin pie with a delicate wafer of pumpkin-seed brittle send us out into the night in ecstasy.

Beneath a bowl of stars upturned overhead, we stroll halfway across the floating bridge to watch the snow sparkle in the dark light, and drowsily savor the absolute stillness.

Contact Clare Innes, a freelance writer in Vermont, at indigoclare@yahoo.com.

If you go . . .

How to get there

Brookfield, Vt., is about 170 miles north of Boston, about a three-hour drive. Take Interstate 93 north to Concord, N.H., and Interstate 89 north to Vermont. Take exit 4, follow signs to Brookfield.

Where to stay

Green Trails Inn
Pond Village, Brookfield
802-276-3412
E-mail: green-trails@innevi.com
A gorgeous farmhouse run by a fabulous cook. Rooms \$95-\$125.

Brookfield B and B
Pond Village, Brookfield
802-276-3146
www.brookfieldbandb.com
A beautifully restored house. Rooms \$95-\$150.

Where to eat

Ariel’s Restaurant and Pond Village Pub

Pond Village, Brookfield
802-276-3939
www.arielsrestaurant.com
Entrees \$21-\$27, pub menu (Sundays only) \$11-\$15. Friday-Sunday 5:30 p.m. to closing. Reservations required.

The Very Small Donut Company

5101 Main St., Waitsfield
802-496-4534
Monday-Saturday 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. (closed Wednesday); Sunday 8-3.

What to do

Nina Gaby Studio and Gallery

Pond Village, Brookfield
802-276-3726
E-mail: ninotchka52@aol.com

Vermont Icelandic Horse Farm

3061 North Fayston Road
Waitsfield
802-496-7141
www.icelandichorses.com
Reservations required. Children must be at least 10 years old. Ride 1¼ hours for \$40.