

Explore New England

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE JANUARY 29, 2006

Vermont's hills are alive with telemarkers



PHOTOS BY DOMINIC CHAVEZ/GLOBE STAFF

Into the woods go a pair of skiers at the Trapp Family Lodge Nordic Ski Center in Stowe, Vt.

By Clare Innes
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Stowe, Vt. It would be difficult to imagine a more sublime setting for perfecting your faceplant than along the 200 miles of cross-country ski trails that wind among the mountains and molehills here.

The sky is brilliantly blue; the trees sport perfect coils of snow; and the sun beams a flattering glow across a panorama of mountains. Tucked up in the flanks of the Green Mountains is the Trapp Family Lodge Nordic Ski Center, an exquisitely groomed collection of trails with a rustic warming cabin at the 2,100-foot apex.

The ski center maintains 31 miles of groomed trails and 27 miles of ungroomed backcountry stashes.

It's little wonder the von Trapps decided to settle in the mountains four years after leaving Nazi-occupied Austria in 1938 — a story immortalized in the play and the 1965 movie "The Sound of Music." In the late 1960s their cross-country ski center was the first in the country to offer trails, equipment, and instruction all in one place.

You run out of superlatives as you gape at the soaring peaks and alpine meadows that surround you. And that's just while you're unloading your skis in the parking lot.

Down in the rental room of the ski center, skiers clamp their impossibly skinny skate skis to customer workbenches and dig into toolboxes overflowing with widgets and waxes that enable them to get another fraction of a mile-per-hour out of their skis.

Outside, cross-country ski, telemark, and snowshoe trails disappear into the trees, reappear on ridgelines and meadows, and then plunge back into the drapery of the forest: sweeping pines; thick stands of paper birches fattened by the cool altitude; and gnarly grandfather maples.

Ever upward, the trails twist and weave toward a steaming bowl of soup and a chewy brownie in front of the fireplace at Slayton Pasture Cabin, a 3.1-mile, 775-foot climb from the lodge.

It seems there are at least as many locals on the trails here as tourists, and they are diehard skiers.

"Well, you could head up Parizo, backtrack onto Oslo, come around Haul Road, and then take Bobcat to Hare Line," comes the reply when we ask a fellow skier for an interesting route to the cabin. And he's not even consulting a map. As he vanishes around the next bend, we consult the handy maps located at each intersection to make sure we're on the right track, and settle on a decidedly more direct squiggle.

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With guests yet to arrive, the dining room at the main lodge softens a cold January dusk.



PHOTOS BY MARK WILSON/GLOBE STAFF

Eagles eyed

At a Connecticut dam, they and their observers are on the lookout

By Patricia Harris and David Lyon
GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

SOUTHURY, Conn. — The eagles were right on cue. Just as we reached the door to the observation blind above the Shepaug Dam, we heard a woman exclaim, "Here they come! Here comes another one!"

We stamped the snow off our boots, pushed inside, and were greeted by an animated Jeff Seelig. "You've arrived just in time," he said, pointing down the snowy field to a barren sycamore tree. "He's right there, chirping away like mad." Sure enough, a faint *kree!* *kree!* carried in the sharp air.

Many of the northern bald eagles wintering over in New England have left Canada for our comparatively balmy clime. But as the region's lakes and rivers ice up, the disappearance of open water poses a problem for the birds, which subsist largely on a diet of freshly caught fish. The pools at the base of the 147-foot Shepaug Dam, however, never freeze, and the turbulence of the water pushes the fish to the surface where eagles can swoop down and snatch them. The area becomes a sashimi bar that's open all winter.

Seelig directed us to the pair of 40x spotting scopes set up on tripods so we could get a good look at the chirping eagle, which turned in profile so we could see its hooked beak. Eagles are about as active



Alyssa Mill, 6, looks through volunteer Bob Giddings's spotting scope at a bald eagle perched outside the trailer at the Shepaug Eagle Observation Area in Southbury, Conn. A pair of birds glide above the Housatonic River — fishing?

as the average house cat. According to logs kept at this observation blind, eagles at the dam spend 86.7 percent of their time perching, 9.2 percent flying, 2.1 percent feeding, and the remaining 2 percent interacting with each other by vocalizing or even fighting.

"They don't want to waste any energy," Seelig explained. "It's not an easy hit for the fish."

Seelig was among a group of volunteer naturalists at the Northeast Utilities Shepaug Eagle Observation Area, as the blind and the buffer-zone field are officially known. Watching

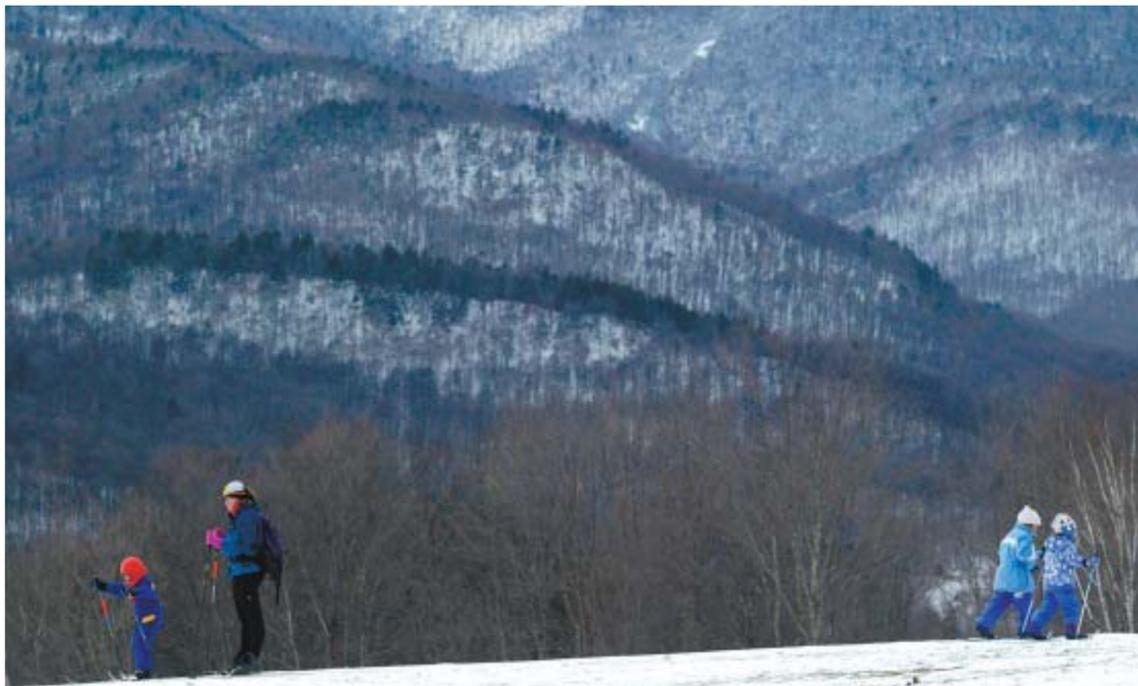
the eagles never gets old; many of the naturalists show up every week during the viewing season. Several whooped with delight when another eagle dropped from the sky, folded its wings into a stall, and alighted on a branch a few feet below one of the others.

They also trained their field glasses and telescopes on the waterfowl swimming in circles around the pools beneath the dam. Dabbling ducks (mostly mallards) seemed to glide along without feeding, but several common mergansers dove and came up with minnows. They were easy to identify, even at a distance. "They're the ones that look like they're having a bad hair day," said naturalist Sandy Calkins,

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YOUR GUIDE TO WINTER ACTIVITIES IN THE REGION
DOWNHILL • CROSS-COUNTRY • CONDITIONS • DEALS • PHOTOS



PHOTOS BY DOMINIC CHAVEZ/GLOBE STAFF

Skiers on a cross-country trail at the Trapp Family Lodge Nordic Ski Center in Stowe, Vt. At day's end is the alpine-styled lodge.

Trails for every taste, solo or in a pod

► VERMONT
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Skate skiers blow by us. Snowshoers plod staunchly along. Newbie telemarkers eke out wobbly turns. Parents pull miniature sleighs (available for rent at the ski center) that are enclosed pods on runners for children too young to make it all the way up under their own power.

FOR MORE VIEWS AROUND THE TRAPP FAMILY LODGE See a photo gallery on explorenewengland.com.

We fall in with a woman hauling one. She has climbing skins attached to her skis — strips covered with a short, synthetic, fur-like material that keep her from sliding backward as she takes on the hills with the sleigh in tow. One of

her favorite runs, solo, is the 10-mile Bolto to Stowe trail, a wildly challenging, staggeringly beautiful trek along a ridgeline of vistas.

At the cabin, a simple yet dreamy structure of log and stone, chickadees, tufted titmice, and downy woodpeckers flit around a birdfeeder hanging from a sunny porch, a ski pole's length away from some snowshoers soaking up the sun. Inside, a fire crackles in a stone hearth and though the long tables are occupied, space is cheerily found for everyone who staggers through the door.

If it's split-pea-soup day, you're in for a treat, but everything is tasty since it's loosely based on recipes sent up from the chef at the fine restaurant at the lodge.

Mike Gora, who lives in the cabin, cooks and serves up three vats of soup on this busy day.

"It's beautiful up here, especially at night," he says. "Even when the moon isn't full, it's so bright you don't need a headlamp to get around."

A short list of his mountaintop compatriots includes coyotes, snowshoe hares, foxes, barred owls, moose, bobcats, and pileated woodpeckers.

We share a table with a couple from Montreal (one of them originally from the former Soviet Union) who come here frequently. Conversation veers from life in Russia to civil unions in Vermont. A couple of high-powered fundraisers who met on the trail are networking at the next table.

We stand with our backs to the fire, drying our fleecy layers and soaking up as much warmth as possible before the trails coax us back outside.

On Hare Line Trail, the sun has begun to turn the Green Mountains to gold as we head around the backside of Round Top Mountain to take the long way back to the lodge. On this quieter side of the ski area, animal tracks come closer to the trails, and narrower, ungroomed snowshoe paths nearby entice us to follow.

The final glow of the day on Mount Mansfield and Spruce and Sterling peaks makes us stop in our tracks, savoring a silence sweetened by a whisper of wind.

We make it back to the parking lot with just enough light to enjoy the wooded back road that leads to Stowe Valley and our journey homeward.

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

If you go . . .

How to get there

Stowe, Vt., is about 212 miles northwest of Boston, about a four-hour drive. Follow Interstate 93 into New Hampshire, to Interstate 89 north at Concord. At exit 10 (Waterbury/Stowe) take a right off the ramp onto Route 100N. In 7½ miles, turn left on Moscow Road. In one mile, turn right on Barrows Road. After one mile, turn left on Trapp Hill Road. The Nordic Ski Center is on the left, just after the main lodge.

Where to stay

Trapp Family Lodge
700 Trapp Hill Road
800-826-7000
www.trappfamily.com

A luxurious, Tyrolean treat handily located at the end of the ski trail. Rooms \$207-\$297. The Sugar Package during maple sugaring season (mid-March to mid-April): \$238-\$328 includes two nights' lodging, breakfast, horse-drawn sugaring ride, sugar-on-snow party.

Fiddler's Green Inn
4859 Mountain Road
800-882-5346
www.fiddlersgreeninn.com

An 1820s farmhouse with a fieldstone fireplace. A three-minute walk to the ski trail network and a five-mile drive to Trapp. Rooms \$90, includes huge breakfast for up to two people.

Inn at Turner Mill

56 Turner Mill Lane (just off Mountain Road)
800-992-0016
www.turnermill.com

A rustic inn with two rooms outfitted with exquisite wood furniture hand-hewn at the mill. \$90, two-night minimum on weekends, no meals.

Where to eat

Trapp Family Lodge

(See above)

Breakfast in the dining hall (full country breakfast \$15; don't skip the Belgian waffles), lunch in the Austrian Tea Room (à la carte menu, most items under \$10), and dinner in the lounge, \$38 for a three-course meal, \$45 for four courses plus à la carte options.

The Cactus Café

2160 Mountain Road
802-253-7770
www.cactuscafestowe.com

Fabulous margaritas, the best salsa in town, and inventive Mexican entrees (\$10-\$19) in a comfortable, beautifully funky setting. Daily 4:30-10 p.m.

McCarthy's

454 Mountain Road
802-253-8626

Where the locals go for a big, tasty breakfast (\$3-\$7) and for a famously hearty Cobb salad, inventive wraps, veggie plates, and burgers for lunch (\$4.50-\$8). Don't leave without trying the apple pancakes. Daily 6:30 a.m.-2 p.m.

Trattoria La Festa

4080 Upper Mountain Road
800-245-5118

www.trattorialafesta.com
Excellent Italian fare (\$16.50-\$22.50) in a delightful old farmhouse. Spaghetti pescatore (\$18.50) is the way to go. Monday-Saturday 5-9:30 p.m.

Blue Moon Café

35 School St.
802-253-7006

www.bluemoonstowe.com
An intimate bistro with entrees (\$17-\$29) that change weekly and an extensive wine list. Daily 6-9:30 p.m.

What to do

Trapp Family Lodge Nordic Ski Center

Just past the main lodge (see above) Nearly 62 miles of groomed and backcountry trails surrounded by the Green Mountains. Trail passes \$16 adults; \$14 65 and older and 12-18; \$5 6-11; free under 6. Rentals: skis, boots, and poles \$20 adult, \$15 child; snowshoes \$20; ice skates \$10; child pod ("pulk") \$10 an hour as available.

Galleries

Stowe Village
Park near the intersection of Main Street and Mountain Road, an area packed with fabulous shops and galleries (including Helen Day Art Center, School Street, 802-253-8358, www.helenday.com, Tuesday-Saturday noon-5, exhibit admission varies; and Stowe Craft Gallery and Design Center, 55 Mountain Road, 802-253-4693, www.stowecraft.com, daily 10-6, till 7 Friday and Saturday; longer hours over February vacation weeks).



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