

Celebrating the new year and fresh snow at Pats Peak



Photo courtesy of PATS PEAK

Pats Peak's trails glow at nighttime under the lights.

Henniker | With 22 trails and piles of real powder, N.H. ski resort provides full day of fun.

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HENNIKER - The new year blew in with 35 mph gusts and a wind chill of minus 10, but with trails loaded with windblown snow and night lights on, there was only one way to celebrate 2009, and that was heading

ONE-TANK TRIP

straight down East Wind to Squall Line at Pats Peak. Pats Peak - an accessible family mountain in the shadow of Sunapee and Crotched Mountain - is lit and ready for a party in the midst of a storm that has kept most of the sane masses home and in pajamas. I am, however, dressed in layers that render my arms and legs almost useless. But at least I'm warm.

Pine branches thwack the trails, but 6 inches of real snow combined with manmade snow give a good glide down and rarely an ice screech. This isn't a place where you rush down trails to avoid the lines because, as the Lifties say that night, "Only the hardcore people are here tonight." I am not especially hardcore but nod my head anyway to show I'm tough, ready to face the screaming winds. I sit hunkered down on the metal chair heading up to carved ice moguls and silent trails at the top.

With 22 trails and six glades, Pats Peak has some of the steepest and longest pitches in southern New England, and it's less than an hour away from Nashua. I decide to take the longest trail rather than the steepest, and Squall Line blows me almost backward. I raise my arms straight out, and with the wind gusts flapping my jacket and freezing my cheeks, I can almost take flight over the hills toward Concord. Instead, I skate the skis and push the poles until I'm headfirst to the lodge that shines in candlelight. I can smell the smoke of a fireplace and see the fogged windows dripping, promising warmth and a hot toddy. I ski over "Happy New Year" spot-lit on the snow, and I feel ready to celebrate skiing six of the 22 trails in sub-zero temperatures.

I take my boots off once inside and push them to the fire screens. Teenage waiters greet frozen skiers in bright red shirts and "Happy New Year" hats. There is a young girl singing karaoke on a makeshift stage

covered in blue and white stage lights. Families pile around picnic tables in their spandex and polypropylene garb, and there is a congratulatory mood in the air, one filled with survival of the fittest. Toes finally warm. Children crawl under tables, and adults line up for food piled high at the Tasting Stations. There is an assortment of egg rolls, ham, cheese and crackers, steak tips and corn dogs; a melange of tidbits that keeps everyone going back again and again. Picnic tables soon get covered by ski helmets and gloves and jackets as the band, a three-piece crowd pleaser called The McMurphy's, starts up. I head to the rustic Sled pub and enjoy staring out at the swirling snow rising in clouds, my hands curved around a mug.

My daughter, Haley, likes to highlight all the trails she skis, and I watch her from the window. A wind blast covers her in a burst of white as she slices down, and I know she's chronicling what trails she's "done" and what "needs to be done" that evening. Her favorites are Tornado, Cyclone and Twister, and she'll keep skiing until the lights are off and the employees shut down the lifts. She raises her pole to the sky as if the weather doesn't matter, night skiing the main pursuit.

After dinner and dessert, the frozen mountain beckons. This time, however, the tubing hill is the way to travel. The tubing park is 600 feet long by 85 feet wide, and you have to lay on your belly, barreling down the iced trail headfirst. This seems like the perfect thing to do on a blustery New Year's Eve night. Helmets are encouraged, and we wear them because they're padded and warm. Usually reserved in two-hour segments, this night is open for six straight. Children as young as 5 careen down, as parents watch in scarves and mittens, waving. The best part is the steep ramp at the end of the run and the backward twirling to rest in a cushioned tube. It is highly addictive even with frozen fingers and toes.

The parking lot is mostly empty when we leave. People pile skis and poles, boots and helmets haphazardly into backs of jeeps, trucks and cars, not caring where they land, only wanting the warmth of the heated car. Children's heads nod sleepily on windows as the mountain glows still in New

Year's bluster and ice. The trails twist downward, empty now, as a chairlift sits motionless, swaying occasionally when a gust hits it.

Pats Peak, founded in 1963, is along the Contoocook River in the quaint, college town of Henniker. They guarantee 100 percent snow coverage throughout the season, and, with lights on all the trails, you can ski until 10 p.m. most evenings in January, February and March. Saturday nights from 3-10 p.m., they offer Pay One Price night. For \$36, you can ski, snowboard and tube, rent skis and snowboards and get ski tips.

For more information, visit www.patspeak.com.