

Romantic winter escape becomes family ski adventure

Trips to White Mountains combine jacuzzis and fine dining with cross-country, downhill skiing

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When you're married to a mountain man who enjoys nothing more than growing out his beard, buttoning up his flannel, and heading directly into the eye of a blizzard, then it can be rough going in the winter. Especially if you are a spa woman who enjoys the finer things in life, such as a bed, warm bath, heat and, perhaps, a four-course meal with candlelight.

ONE-TANK TRIP

It was time to take my mountain man to the spa or at least a country inn with perks. The only concession was that I would have to brave the elements.

Our first adventure was a cross-country ski up to Tyrol, an abandoned ski area in Jackson. Staying at the elegant Wentworth Inn in downtown Jackson with an indoor hot tub, king sleigh bed, gas fireplace and his and hers bathrobes sounded like the perfect compromise. We had a plan to ski up the 2.3-kilometer Gräustein Loop to Swamp Run, described by Jackson Touring Co. as "difficult with drops through a series of downhills from the abandoned-ski area." There would be an elevation differential of more than 190 feet, so this would be a challenge.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for this," I told my husband.

"Just do it," he told me. I thought of the indoor hot tub and gas fireplace and those his and hers robes.

"I will."

Then, my daughter's sleepover got canceled, and my husband had to be out of town with his job.

"Haley," I said to my daughter. "You want to ski up to an abandoned ski area?" I was hoping she'd say no.

"Absolutely," she answered. Ice sculptures designed by area chefs glisten in greeting when Haley and I arrive mid-afternoon at the Wentworth. Surrounded on all sides by mountains - Thorn Mountain, Tin Mountain, Spruce Mountain, Doublehead, Black Mountain, Giant's Stairs, Iron Mountain and the Moat Range - the Wentworth is ideally located for adventure.

When Haley and I check in, an aura of silence competes with a crackling fire in the lobby. I want to sit a while, but for Haley, it was time to eat and walk around town before sunset. With the frozen Wildcat and Glen Ellis rivers just outside the lobby doors, the Wentworth seems ready to float away. We walk downtown to the Wildcat Pub, which was hosting a skier pasta dinner night. After loading up the carbs for the next day, we head back to the romantic inn and get into our matching robes for an indoor, candlelit hot tub.

In the morning, after a three-course breakfast, we watch

views of Cannon Mountain and Mount Lafayette. Our room has a California king bed, overflowing feather pillows and a gas fireplace. Just outside our room is a quaint library filled with books, magazines and ski maps.

"How about Zoomer Trail at 8:30 a.m. and then some mogul runs right after?" Haley asks on the way to dinner.

If you come for nothing else in Sugar Hill, come for the dining at Steve Allen's inn: Dinner is a four-course, prix-fixé extravaganza: Allen is cognizant of portion size, so with each course, you aren't thinking, "Oh, no, not more" but, "Bring it on." Every course is presented in artistic fashion. Haley

starts with a trio of soups in tiny cups, while Brian and I find heaven in Roasted Butternut Squash Risotto and Veal Short Rib Tortellini. Chef Val's Caesar salads are encased in Parmesan cheese custard shells, and we are amazed at their likeness to birds' nests because they are so delicate. The Chilean Salmon in a light butter and wine sauce is delicious, and my husband devours the Pan Roasted Duck with gingered sweet potato.

"Did you know that Cannon has a vertical drop of 2,148 feet," Haley says. She then discusses Cannon history, because skiing is the main focus of her life at present. We listen as she talks about the mountain being a 4,000-footer and that there will be nine lifts to enjoy in the morning.

"This is Bode-Miller Land," Haley says reverently, knowing that Bode grew up in nearby Franconia Village. "He's awesome."

Order Creme Brulee Three Ways for dessert in honor of our romantic getaway. All three of us share one spoon.

Later, I soak in the two-person Jacuzzi, while my husband and Haley make early ski plans. As the candles glow and the tub soothes, I realize I can relax just fine with my family all around. Gourmet dining, bubble bath, a couple of glasses of Chardonnay, a fluffy robe, king-size bed - it's, as they say, "All good."

Then I hear Haley say, "Let's set the alarm for 6, Dad." I sink deeper into that whirlpool tub until my ears fill with water.

"Please let Cannon be warm tomorrow," I say.

"And surprisingly, it is. Beautifully warm at 20 degrees, with perfect conditions. There is even a barber shop quartet singing at lunchtime - men in their 70s wearing Patriots sweatshirts and singing tunes of the 1950s to entertain the masses hunkered down in the Tram Lodge.

A perfect getaway.

lucky kids from Jackson Elementary glide around in circles on the racetrack for recess.

"That's not fair," Haley says. But I just remind her that she's missing school, and she adjusts her cross-country skis.

She wears me out more than any Mountain Man.

"Let's do the abandoned ski resort first, then head over the covered bridge, and end up on the Wentworth fields." She studied the trails last night, making plans for a full day of skiing and barely time for lunch.

"OK," I sigh.

In its prime, Tyrol had a vertical drop of 1,000 feet and a variety of terrain, which included four novice trails, six intermediate trails and four expert trails. Tyrol Ski Area failed in the 1980s because it lacked a needed water supply for snow making, and most skiers traveled to larger ski resorts, such as Wildcat, Black and Cranmore mountains.

"Look," she says, pointing out an old trail sign. "There's an old lift."

Haley's tracks are parallel, going uphill, but going down, she leaps from the tracks to the open trail and glides.

After a quick lunch at yesterday's soup and sandwich, we loop along Ellis River trail to the Ellis River Cabin, a warming hut that, on weekends, serves hot chocolate to the masses. The easy, rolling terrain is perfect for the end of the day, and with the daylight dimming, it only makes sense to head over to the covered bridge. Aptly called the Kissing Bridge due to all the honeymooners coming to Jackson for romance, Haley and I simply pass through.

The Mountain Man and Spa Woman try again - an escape to the mountains for adventure and pampering. This time, we'd hand our daughter over to Nana and head to Sugar Hill Inn so that we could ski at the coldest mountain in New England - Cannon.

The Sugar Hill Inn was built by the Oakes family in 1789. As reported by the Sugar Hill Historical Society, the Oakes were "one of the early settling families in the Sugar Hill area (and) they are counted among the score of hearty and independent folks who came into the White Mountains of New Hampshire in search of a better life."

What better place than a post-and-beam inn, with fireplaces in most rooms as the pampering apres ski zone. And with his strong culinary background, Steve Allen promised gastronomic gladness.

However, we, again, would be bringing our daughter.

"Let's get up early for Cannon," Haley says, the night we check in. "For first chair."

Situated in the Franconia region, Sugar Hill is dotted by