

SKI REPORT

The Year It Snowed, and Snowed, and

By BILL PENNINGTON

IT was outside the general store in the sleepy central Vermont town of Rochester that the grizzled man in a worn hat and coat approached my car. He passed a pile of snow that rose 10 feet above the street. Behind him, on the village green, an ornate gazebo was nearly buried in drifting snow.

Eyeing the New York license plates and the rooftop Thule, he asked, "Are you one of those nice people who prayed for snow in Vermont?"

When I smiled, he said before turning away: "We in Vermont know your prayers have been answered."

That was Presidents' Day weekend last month, and it would snow as much as a foot that day, bringing the season-long total snowfall in the region at that point to about 18 feet. On the lifts at Sugarbush Mountain that afternoon, the snow was falling so fast you were completely blanketed — helmet to boots — in dry, white flakes by the time you reached the summit.

It was snowing so hard there wasn't much point in trying to look more than five turns down the trail. Snow gathered on your goggles at the slightest pause and pelted your face with a non-stop pitter-patter.

It was crazy. And all around me, I did not see anyone heading into the lodge. We would charge down the mountain, vague shadows in the blowing squall, stop during the 30-second lift line long enough to grin at each other, knock some snow off and head back up. You don't leave conditions like that until the lifts stop.

Vermont and much of the rest of northern New England are enjoying an epic snow year. It was the snowiest February in more than 50 years, according to the Vermont Ski Areas Association, and the snowfall totals for the season already rank this winter as one of the 10 snowiest in 130

years. It is hard to imagine how it can get much better, unless it is another week from now, when the snow will still be plentiful, the temperatures warmer and the spring skiing and riding spectacular. And remember, March is typically the month when the most snow falls on the Northeast's largest mountains.

Just north of Sugarbush, Stowe Mountain has reported that more than 26 feet of snow has fallen this winter. Killington in central Vermont has had nearly 20 feet of snow and the southern Vermont resorts, while not quite as blessed with outrageous snowfalls, have had dependable, six-foot base depths for several weeks. Okemo Mountain had its busiest day ever over Presidents' Day weekend. Mount Snow had so much snow late last month that its staff looked at a clearing under the area's Summit Local chairlift and decided to open it as a new trail.

"The snow was just too good," said Heath Woods, Mount Snow's ski patrol director. "I guess now we have to name the thing."

There have been other benefits to the abundant snowfall at some resorts. Several, like Stowe and Sugarbush, recently started new real estate ventures. That might not seem like great timing, given the nationwide swoon in home sales, but a funny thing happens when there is a copious amount of snow in the hills. It draws people out of the valleys, and with great conditions they have a memorable experience.

In second-home real estate, they are selling memorable experiences. The spectacular snow year has been a marketing bonanza disguised as a weather event.

Walter Frame, director of operations for the 500-unit Spruce Peak development at Stowe, said he thought most buyers looking for luxury homes and residences were not easily dissuaded by eco-

nomie downturns. But he conceded that the heavy snowfall has visitors in a good mood, and noted that even when it rained on the Monday of Presidents' Day weekend, it became a successful sales day.

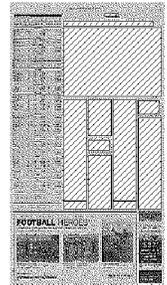
"The day before was sunny and nobody wanted to get off the slopes, but the next day when people couldn't ski we had one of our best days," said Mr. Frame, whose Spruce Peak units have been selling for between \$350,000 and \$5.5 million. "Let's face it, those people wouldn't have been here if there wasn't great snow."

At Sugarbush, the resort opened the resplendent 61-unit Clay Brook property in December 2006 and has sold about 80 percent of the whole-ownership and fractionally owned condos. Heather Loughlin, a Sugarbush vice president for real estate development, said sales have remained strong this winter and credited early December snowfall, which made the pivotal Christmas week a busy and happy one.

"It all starts with Christmas, when you've got people in the suites dreaming of coming back year after year," said Ms. Loughlin, whose fully furnished units range in price from \$125,000 to \$1.4 million. "They leave happy, and it sets the tone for all the winter holidays."

I can attest to a lot of happy faces on Presidents' Day weekend, and it was not confined to central Vermont. In the middle of that weekend, I drove east across the Connecticut River into New Hampshire and headed to the Dartmouth Skiway, which is a jewel of a ski area.

THE snow was consistent and deep, but that is not the best reason to visit the Dartmouth Skiway, which is in Lyme Center, N.H., and owned by nearby Dartmouth College. You go to the Dartmouth Skiway for 30 trails and a trip back in time of about 30 years. Let's start with



the prices for lift tickets. When I got there after lunch on a holiday Saturday, there was a line of eight people for the half-day tickets about to go on sale. They were \$32 for adults, \$25 for teens and \$20 for children under 12. The full-day prices were only about \$5 more. If you're over 80 years old, or 5 years old or younger, it's free.

The trails were split into two peaks on either side of a country road. It was classic New England terrain with winding trails separated by large groves of trees so that each path seemed remote. With nearly 1,000 vertical feet, it's no little bump, but the Winslow side of the area is very family friendly.

Crossing the road to the Holt's Ledge side — and you do just that, walk across the road carrying your skis — there are some trails with a little more bite. And while the lift is slow by modern, high-speed standards, and while the slopes are not going to scare any truly advanced skiers or riders, there is a relaxed pace that is intoxicating. There was never a lift line, and this on a day that the Skiway's general manager, Doug Holler, called the busiest of the season.

The Holt's Ledge lift also brings skiers to Don Worden's Schuss, the race trail used by Dartmouth's decorated race team, the N.C.A.A. 2007 men's and women's ski champions. Point your skis straight down this trail testing your inner racer and you won't feel like you're on some sleepy family mountain for long.

The Dartmouth Skiway is a gem hidden away in the New Hampshire countryside. It's a little hard to find as you snake through narrow roads rippled with muffler-busting humps brought on by frost heaves, but once found, the Skiway is the kind of place not soon forgotten.

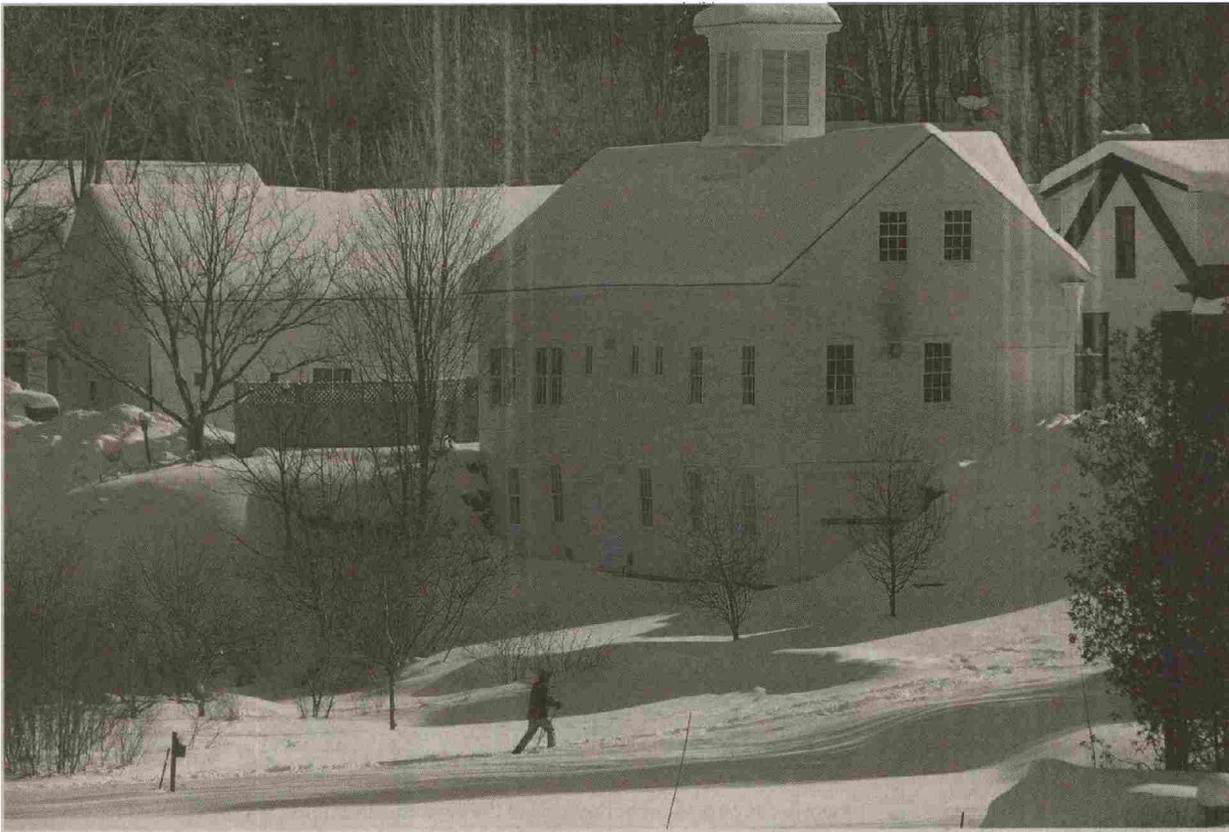
And this is the year to discover it. The snow will never be better.

Vermont's winter has helped drive real estate sales.

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PAUL O. BOISVERT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

SHROUDED Stowe, Vt., mantled by the exceptional amounts of snow that have fallen this year, with snowy March still in progress.