

Tempted to Tame Wildcat Mountain

By JOHN BRILEY
Special to The Washington Post

For me, the New England ski scene has always transcended the skiing itself. Out West, all I need is a big mountain and place to crash, ideally with heat and indoor plumbing. The Northeast, though, is more about the whole experience — the time-warp base lodges, gray-bearded mountain men, low-ceilinged inns with fires crackling in the bar, maybe even a little wicked weather. All of these were in play during an early February weekend I spent with my friend Bill in and around Wildcat Mountain, outside the tiny village of Jackson, N.H.

I was drawn to Wildcat, a lesser-known New Hampshire resort, for its vertical drop (2,112 feet, the highest in the state), ample snowfall of about 200-plus inches per year and scenic location in White Mountain National Forest. It's a nonstop flight from BWI to Manchester, then a 2½-hour drive, part of which bisects the national forest. There are resorts closer to Manchester, but only Wildcat sits directly across the highway from Mount Washington. Yes, *that* Mount Washington, the highest mountain in the eastern United States at 6,288 feet and the site of the strongest surface wind gust ever recorded on planet Earth: 231 mph during an April 1934 storm.

Armed with a stat like that, you'd think one would check the weather before heading out in the morning. I didn't, which is why, as I was getting out of the car, I was nearly cracked like a walnut when a furious gust blistered the open door, which in turn slammed me into the door frame.

"You want severe weather? You came to the right place!" a Wildcat Mountain host named Wally offered with an enthusiastic cackle as we tottered toward the lodge, leaning into the wind. We wanted to ski, but loose snow was whipping sideways across the hill, there was only one lift running (out of four) and the upper half of the mountain was closed. The forecast? Sustained winds of 80 to 90 mph. (Wildcat would end up closing for the day by noon; the top wind gust registered 120 mph.)

We stuck to the lodge for half an hour with a bunch of other non-weather-checkers before hatching our backup plan: Drive the 10 minutes back down to Jackson, rent cross-country ski gear and schuss into lower-lying areas of the national forest, where the dense tree cover affords shelter from the

wind.



The parking lot at Jackson XC Ski Touring Center is packed. Nordic ski enthusiasts

bustle in and around the wood-and-stone center like bees at a hive.

Neither the crowd nor the fervor is unusual here. Jackson is a serious cross-country skiing town — rated tops for the sport in the eastern United States — and the center, which serves almost 100 miles of trails, can handle busy days. Within 15 minutes we are set up, clicked in and following a groomed ski track across a vast field of white, through an oh-so-quiet covered bridge, across a country road and onto a forested trail.

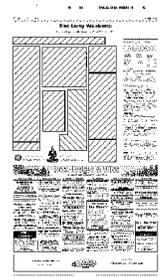
We set the pressing pace of people who had expected to go fast on skis today, and cover 11 miles of rolling, out-and-back trail in under three hours. The route parallels the Ellis River, which is frozen in all the right places and tufted with snow mounds, a burbling advertisement for New England winter beauty.

I prefer alpine skiing, but I also love cross-country, in large part because it allows me to dispense with daily exercise in a couple of brisk hours, leaving time for the more serious exercise of salooning in socked feet.

At 3 p.m., a light crowd is building in Tuckerman Ravine, the bar portion of the historic Wildcat Inn and Tavern (no relation to the ski hill). The powder blue inn, with bowed wood floors and a long, windowed dining room facing the sidewalk, sits on Jackson's main drag, which is dominated by historic lodging options.

We book the last available room — a dormered, remodeled attic right above the tavern — then settle in at one of the bar's two crackling fireplaces, kick off our shoes and marvel at how damn good a cold beer tastes after a stint of exertion in the great outdoors.

Live music is on the slate until midnight, meaning we aren't sleeping anytime before 12:01. As a singer-guitarist plugs in for a



warm-up set, it hits us that sitting in one place quaffing beers straight through to last call will appreciably boost the risk of searing hangovers, lost shoes and wildly inaccurate travel notes.

The solution? Head a few miles south, to Delaney's Hole in the Wall pub and restaurant in North Conway for margaritas and an early dinner. Brilliant! Thus fortified, we arrive back at Tuckerman Ravine to find a tip-sy sea of regulars grooving to a harp-driven alt-bluesy-rock band. Notes get fuzzy here; cue the next day.



Wildcat Mountain opens the next morning under sunny, windless skies with conditions that most New Englanders would call excellent: packed powder with a periodic crust formed by the prior day's maelstrom, and fast-groomed cruiser runs.

Most of Wildcat's 47 trails fall somewhere between the elbow-tight trails that characterize many Northeastern resorts and the broad, open-slope skiing of the West. We're able to ski fast at most times, but occasionally skid into hockey stops at crowded chokepoints.

From a scenery perspective, stopping is advisable: Across a valley of dense pine and birch lurks Mount Washington, its peak cloaked in clouds. The rest of the mountain is visible, including a menacing section of above-tree-line terrain, and the aesthetic effect is downright Western.

Bill and I spend the day doing laps on Wildcat's eponymous high-speed quad chairlift, which runs base to peak in six minutes. With no lift lines we manage nine runs — almost 19,000 vertical feet of skiing — in

less than five hours.

Our legs are noodled, but we have one more run to make, back to the inn to return a forgotten room key. When we arrive, a handful of people are sunk into couches in the tavern, the tops of their heads and outstretched feet visible from behind. At this point, it's a taunt — we've got a plane to catch — but it comforts me all the same, knowing that New England perseveres, fantasy matched by reality.

John Briley last wrote for Travel about investing in Nicaraguan real estate.



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BY JOHN BRILEY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Fly nonstop from BWI to New Hampshire to check out the ski scene.