

Thoughts On The Out-Of-Doors: Cross Country Skiing In The Mount Washington Valley

- Gary W. Moore
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The Buttonwood Inn.

The Nor'easter came just in time to dump a few inches of snow on the trails prior to my long-planned visit to the Mount Washington Valley on Monday and Tuesday last week. If only the big storm we got Friday had been five days earlier, it would have been even better skiing.

While on one of my visits to North Conway last spring, I learned about the Mt. Washington Valley Ski Touring & Snowshoe Foundation and the trail network it maintains. The snow was going fast so I did not ski but left determined to return to explore some of the 40 km of trails.

Over 30 years ago, a group of community leaders established the network of cross country ski trails linking points of scenic beauty, ski-related services and lodging in Intervale, Kearsarge and North Conway with hopes of increasing occupancy in the trailside lodging properties. Being able to access the trails from a lodging property then ski or snowshoe into North Conway Village for lunch or shopping made for a unique experience that continues today.

Seven area lodging establishments and three retail businesses offer free daily trail passes for their guests and patrons.

The Foundation's cross country ski and snowshoe trails encompass terrain for all abilities and connect the three municipalities. The trails are groomed for both classic and skate skiing so the choice is yours.

I spent Monday afternoon on the northern section of the network in Intervale. After picking up my trail passes at Ragged Mountain Equipment, the outdoor gear destination and one of my favorite stops when in the area, I headed out back to the trailhead parking.

The trails meander through mostly open hardwood forest and along the Saco River. The whole area is nearly flat so the skiing is easy and suitable for all abilities.

Three couples were doffing their skis after time on the trails when I started out but I never saw another person while I skied. No doubt it would be a very different story on weekends. It was nice to enjoy a bit of solitude despite being so close to housing developments.

Tuesday, I headed to the southern trails in North Conway. A range of trails for all abilities crisscrosses the town of Conway's Whitaker Woods Conservation Lands.

There the network of trails is in a primarily softwood forest comprised of towering white pines interspersed with other species. As one skier told me when I arrived, it was a tight network of trails that went from the mostly level along Route 302 back up the hill to Kearsarge Road.

A couple of women on snowshoes accompanied by dogs, which I just had to stop and pet, and four or five skiers were all I encountered.

The non-profit Mt. Washington Valley Ski Touring & Snowshoe Foundation has a relationship with the local municipalities I mentioned earlier. The trails are used by the local schools for their cross country ski programs and the high school for nordic team for training and races. All area students are invited to get a free season pass.

Fees for the trails are: \$17 per day for adults 15-59, \$10 for those 6-14, \$10 for seniors 60-70, children under 6 are free as are seniors over 70. Annual memberships cost \$100 for adults, \$65 for seniors and juniors and \$175 for families.

Town of Conway residents can get a season pass for just \$15. What a nice opportunity for year round recreation available to locals and visitors alike.

Check out the website, www.mwvskitouring.org, for information on what is offered such as guided snowshoe walks, snowshoe yoga and fat biking.

A special event chocolate lovers won't want to miss is the February 27 Chocolate Festival. The founders began the Chocolate Festival, which has become an annual fundraiser, soon after they formed the foundation.

Festival participants cross country ski or snowshoe between a number of trailside businesses for treats and an opportunity to visit the businesses. Last year was the only

year the event was cancelled as a result of the pandemic. The 32nd Annual Inn-to-Inn Chocolate Festival will be held this year. Over 1200 people attended the 2020 event which was the largest ever. Ticket sales are limited this year for the first time for a more manageable and safer event with only a few tickets left at this time.

Besides the website, you can call 603-356-9920 or email ski@NWVSkiTouring.org for more information.

Cozy and Comfortable Buttonwood Inn

I spent Monday night at the delightful Buttonwood Inn, once an 1800s farmhouse on Mt. Surprise. It is a country inn and bed and breakfast that offers 10 guest rooms, each tastefully decorated.

Donna-Marie Cecere and Doug Wheaton are the husband and wife owners and innkeepers. They are new to the business but are very enthusiastic and most welcoming to their guests. Need something, want directions or suggestions for places to eat, just ask.

The Buttonwood is also one of the inns that offer free trail passes to their guests.

My room was huge and included a four-poster bed, a couch, two comfortable chairs and a fireplace that warmed me as I relaxed and read in the evening. The room also had a big two-person jacuzzi tub in the bathroom as well as a shower.

A hot tub out back of the inn sat ready for guests. A path to it was shoveled but I decided to forgo the tub, preferring the fireplace for relaxation.

The complimentary afternoon tea and beverage service includes Donna-Marie's home-baked goodies. A large sitting room furnished with antiques and a collection of Department 56 buildings and warmed by a fireplace is an ideal place to enjoy the

afternoon or any time. There is also a large common room downstairs that also has a fireplace and television as well as an assortment of wines available to guests.

The gourmet breakfast served was memorable. I sat by a window in the brightly decorated dining room with the morning sun warming my back while I enjoyed fresh fruit and an omelet cooked just right with a side of toast. Add to that coffee and orange juice and I left to ski with my appetite satiated. I turned down homemade sausage for fear I would want to nap rather than exercise.

The Buttonwood Inn encompasses five acres of fields and forest just two miles from North Conway. Step out back and you have access to the hiking trails on Bartlett Mountain.

Check out the inn at <https://buttonwoodinn.com> or call 603-356-2625 or email innkeeper@buttonwoodinn.com.

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