



Smuggler's Notch

family fun in vermont

by Peggy Sijswerda

Having spent most of my life in the South, I find snow something of an oddity. It's pretty to look at, fun to fool around in—but only for a few minutes. The best part for me is coming inside, changing

out of wet clothes, warming up with hot cocoa and crunchy cookies, and sitting by a lovely fire, cheeks all aglow. In other words, I like to keep my distance from snow.

I happen to be married to someone—that would be Peter—who loves the snow, and guess what? Our three sons, Scott, Jasper and Ross, feel the same way. So every year we take a road trip to a ski resort, so my boys can play in the snow. And every year I bravely put on my long underwear, ski pants, two shirts, ski jacket, scarf, mittens, goggles, and my neon pink beanie and join them, hoping this time that I'll have a breakthrough and figure out exactly how the skis—and my legs—are supposed to stay together as I swoosh downhill. Invariably, I end up on my back in the snow, legs akilter, elbows akimo, grappling for my poles, trying to

stand up and put my skis back on without falling down again. Not a pretty picture.

Sometimes I get fed up. My toes are freezing, the snow is slippery, it's raining icy little pellets, and I can't feel the ends of my fingers. That's when it's time to head back to the condo and just chill. As I sit on the couch wrapped in a blanket, sipping hot cocoa, I try not to beat myself up for my shortcomings on the slopes and instead accept the fact that a snow bunny I'm not.

WINTER WONDERLAND

For families who love snow and for those like mine that include someone less wild about the white stuff, I know a place in Vermont everyone will enjoy. Smuggler's Notch, about an hour outside of Burlington, specializes in family fun. In fact they guarantee it! There's plenty

to do for kids and parents on the slopes and off. My family and I visited Smugg's for the third time this winter and found it more fun than ever.

Peter and the kids were overjoyed on the drive up as snow poured out of the sky. Of course, we were on the highway during this nasty blizzard, a harrowing experience to be sure. But one thing those New Englanders know how to do and that is, clear the roads when it snows. We followed snow plows for miles, knowing that ahead of them the snow was half a foot deep and getting deeper. New Englanders also know how to drive in the snow, something we Southerners will never master. Peter, who has lived in snowy climes in past chapters of his life, does fine driving on snowy roads. Me? I'm working my imaginary brake, gripping the dashboard, and gnashing my teeth.

Fortunately we got to Smugg's without incident and checked into our gorgeous condo, which featured three bedrooms, a fully equipped kitchen, and a cozy gas fireplace. After sitting down to a nice dinner, we fell asleep early, and I dreamed of dancing down the snowy trails on my skis, a graceful ballerina in a pink beanie.

The next morning the wall of windows in the living room revealed a winter wonderland. Thick powdery snow—at least a foot and half—covered the landscape as far as you could see. Everyone was anxious to get out on the resort's three mountains: Morse for beginners, Sterling for intermediate, and Madonna for experienced skiers and riders. Even I started to get excited as we geared up for the cold after eating a hearty breakfast. Ross would be joining the Notch Squad Snowboard Camp, an all-day camp that included time on the slopes as well as games and activities, while his older brothers would head off to snowboard together. I had a lesson scheduled that afternoon but felt like getting a head start, so Peter and I dropped Ross off at camp and climbed aboard the Morse Mountain lift.

The first challenge for me is always getting off the lift without losing my balance and ending up face first in the snow. Luckily I managed to ski off without mishap. But that was the last thing I did right. The next hour and a half was stress city. I didn't fall, but I was totally tense, cold, and just couldn't remember anything I'd learned from 10+ years of skiing. I was so frustrated that I canceled my lesson and spent the afternoon hibernating in the condo while the rest of my family danced down the slopes without me. I seriously wondered if I would venture out again.

That evening at dinner Peter and the boys talked excitedly about their exploits on the mountains. Jasper and Ross loved the terrain parks, and Scott was happy just snowboarding down the trails. I decided I would try again tomorrow. Maybe my luck would change. To be on the safe side, I checked out the list of activities—just in case I changed my mind. Hmm, let's



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family fun in vermont (cont.)

see: snowshoe walk, chocolate tasting, spa treatment, indoor pool, pottery and painting classes, a beading studio. Good to know there was plenty to do....

FLYING DOWNHILL

The next afternoon, I actually did dance down the slopes on my skis, thanks to Pepper, my valiant instructor. He reminded me of all the things I was doing wrong. "It's natural," he said, "to lean back when you're going downhill." But it's not the right way to ski, he explained. You need to lean forward. I knew this, but I'd forgotten. Every year it seems I learn the same lessons all over again. Then I replace my bad habits with better ones, and by the end of the vacation, I'm practically flying downhill. OK, I'm exaggerating a little, but you get the idea. A natural I'm not.

Nevertheless, I enjoy giving it a go each year. What was new for me at Smugg's this time was branching out and trying some new activities. Like snowshoeing. I highly recommend it. One morning while my family headed for the slopes, I went out with a guide named Terri on a lovely group walk through snowy woods. We used Nordic poles and aluminum snowshoes to hike along trails, and it proved to be a great workout.

During the walk, I talked to Amanda, a woman from New Jersey who admitted she didn't ski. "My family loves it, though," she said. For her getting out on these winter walks gave her the chance to commune with nature and get some exercise. Other than her daily walk, Amanda was content to relax in the condo while her family skied and boarded. She's my kind of gal.

In fact, that's one of the lessons I learned on this ski trip with my family. It's OK if I choose other activities besides skiing. It's my vacation, too, and if I'm not totally comfortable out on the slopes, then by gosh, I don't have to do it. This

was a breakthrough for me, maybe the one I was searching for. Life is short. We should spend it doing things we want to do.

But Terri, my snowshoe guide, said something that rang in my ears that afternoon. "If you're not living on the edge," she said, "you're taking up too much room." I decided to try skiing one more time. And guess what? That afternoon everything clicked. The natural rhythm came back, my body relaxed, and the skis did the rest. I hummed my favorite Strauss waltz as I zipped merrily downhill, thinking "I can do this, yes!" and I added another lesson to the pile: Sometimes you have to get out of your comfort zone to learn what you can really do.

CONNECTING WITH FAMILY

That night we joined a group of families for one of Smugg's evening activities, "I-Did-a-Sled." In a warm cozy yurt next to Sir Henry's Hill, the learning area, a friendly staff person passed out cardboard boxes and rolls of duct tape. Charged with making sleds, the families quickly got to work. The sleds needed to carry two people down the hill, and whoever got to the bottom first was the winner.

Peter volunteered to ride with Ross, and they climbed the hill with their sled alongside about 15 other family pairs. I stood at the bottom, stamping my feet to keep warm. During the race, two sleds took off like rockets. Turns out they had duct-taped the entire bottom of the sled, which gave them tremendous advantage. The rest of the sleds meandered downhill, some drifting sideways, others turning upside down. Ross' sled was in the latter category, but he had a ball and wanted to continue sledding long after the race ended.

Smugg's also offers tube sliding on Sir Henry's Hill, as well as a new activity this year called airboarding. Similar to an

inflatable sled or a boogie board, airboards are lightweight and easy to maneuver down the slopes. The night we wanted to try airboarding, however, the resort canceled it on account of subfreezing temps. I guess even Vermonters have their limits.

Families who like to swim will love the resort's three indoor pools. Ross enjoyed the pool near our condo, which was filled with all kinds of spray hoses, overflowing buckets, waterfalls, and slides. Another great activity for younger kids is the Fun Zone, a colorful indoor playground with lots of games, inflatables, slides, minigolf, and other fun stuff. Teens will want to head over to Teen Alley where they can hang out and play video games.

If your kids are age six weeks to three years, you can arrange day care at Treasures, Smugg's state-of-the-art child care facility, where trained caregivers engage your toddlers in age-appropriate activities. Children older than three can learn to ski at the award-winning Snow

Sport University. You can even book a packages that include camps for kids.

Our last day at Smuggler's Notch turned out to be an icy one, and I decided to quit while I was ahead. I'd had a couple spills the day before, and my muscles and bones ached. While my family skied, I spent the day reading and generally loafing the day away. It was just what I needed.

That night as we played cards after dinner, I looked around at my family's faces, still rosy from the winter air, and experienced a sense of closeness that I've missed at home lately. When I think about it, that's the best reason for family vacations: to reconnect with your loved ones, to slow down enough to remember what really matters.

Each other. ■

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