

Happy Trails

Outdoor adventures and indulgent accommodations at the Mountain Top Inn chase away any midwinter blues

By YVONNE DALEY

Photographed by
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Top right: Snazzy clothes and cool shades make a formidable fashion statement as 3-year-old Abigail Hill hits the snowshoe trail. Above: Striking scenes heighten the sensation for Nordic skiers.



Roger Hill's mom was the general manager at The Mountain Top Inn and Resort in Chittenden, so by the time he was a teen he was making snow, driving Sno-Cats and grooming cross-country ski trails. He had also hiked, biked, skied or ridden a horse around nearly every inch of the grounds and into the Green Mountain National Forest, which forms the resort's dramatic backdrop.

Hill, now 34 and director of programs and facilities at the resort, is not alone in having roots here. (Nor is he the Roger Hill of Radio Vermont forecasting fame.) More than half of the ski shop's staff and many other employees were born in town or have worked at Mountain Top for years. It's no wonder guests feel like family at the 61-year-old, four-season resort.

Diane Dickerman, director of marketing and public relations, says the staff's encyclopedic knowledge of the

region and the hospitality of employees set Mountain Top apart. "We're relatively small, with just 31 rooms, so there's opportunity for intimacy as well as getting to know other guests. And everyone who works here is more than helpful — whether it's a question about the local history or suggestions for things to do."

Wilderness activities

The Mountain Top Inn and Resort is located 11 miles from Rutland, a major center in mid/southern Vermont. The road to "downtown Chittenden," a sweet hamlet of about 1,200 people, is two miles long and climbs uphill, where higher elevation often translates into more natural snow.

The inn itself is a welcoming post-and-beam structure built from native wood and outfitted with a combination of rustic and indulgent furnishings — from antler chandeliers to whirlpool baths.

Then, there are the views. Most guest rooms and the outdoor patio look onto Chittenden Reservoir, a 741-acre reservoir surrounded by national forestland and the Green Mountains, providing a canvas for the full effect of Vermont's distinct seasons.

In winter, activities include sledding, skating, dogsled rides, evening snowmobile tours, sleigh rides drawn by a team of Clydesdales or Percherons, and Nordic skiing and snowshoeing across 80 kilometers of trails, 40 of which are groomed. For Alpine skiers, Killington and Pico are just a short drive away.

Still, Hill is a realist when it comes to winter weather, so along with making snow on a one-kilometer loop and grooming trails daily, he's come up with a host of options to keep guests entertained — both indoors and out.

The inn's sleigh, handmade in Austria, can run on wheels or runners. And while Mountain Top specializes in creature comforts, there's plenty of wilderness just outside the resort's doors — nesting loons on the lake and eagles nearby; moose, deer, black bears, coyotes and red and gray foxes deep in the woods beyond. Hill acts as a guide for those who want to view the region's wildlife on skis, snowshoes or, in the warmer months, by bike, canoe or kayak.

There is also a clay bird shooting range on site, with instruction and equipment available.

After all that activity, it's good to know there's also a licensed massage therapist on staff.

Fit for a president

The Mountain Top Inn was once just a large and rambling barn built on the Henry Long family's turnip farm in the 1870s. Seventy years later, friends of Thomas Edison named Douglas and Françoise Barstow purchased the Long farm and turned the old barn into an exclusive summer resort called the Mountain Top Tavern.

Most older locals, however, associate the inn's long history with Bill and Margery Wolfe, who fell in love with the property and bought the tavern in 1945. The next year, they began offering lodging, changed the name to Mountain Top Inn, and ran the resort with other family members until 1995.

During those years, President Dwight D. Eisenhower visited in 1955 as part of a fishing expedition. Alpine skiing came and went during that time, too: In 1957, a downhill ski area called Apple Hill was established with a 1,000 foot T-bar and a rope tow, but Nordic skiing was added in 1964 and Alpine faded away.

In 1977, fire destroyed the majority of the original inn, which was rebuilt in 1979 and expanded using native wood for the new construction. The current owners, Steve and Lauren Bryant, purchased the resort in 2002.

Indulgences for the 21st century

The Bryants gave the resort a complete renewal and upgrade. Lauren Bryant combined classic mountain lodge décor with a touch of elegance. The common room has leather couches and bentwood rockers surrounding a fieldstone fireplace made more comfy with the rich colors of an Oriental rug, cut-glass lamps and multiple candles. Guests can gather here for afternoon cookies, cider, coffee and tea.

Along with one- and two-bedroom suites, the inn has five rustic, pet-friendly cabins and private chalets for rent. Luxury rooms have one king- or two queen-size beds, two-person whirlpool baths, steam showers and televisions, and several have kitchenettes and balconies. Guests can stay in the room Eisenhower slept in ("Ike's View"); it's a single luxury room not far from "Mamie's Retreat," named for the first lady, even though she wasn't in Ike's entourage.

In the main dining room, antler chandeliers and snowshoe-seat chairs are paired with white tablecloths, signaling that the menu, changed seasonally, will be equal parts country and high cuisine.

The resort has become popular for weddings and accommodates up to 160 guests, who can, of course, plunge into the action sports or pursue lighter diversions including croquet and lawn games, picnic pontoon rides, a private beach on Chittenden Reservoir, fly-fishing on a private stocked pond, or the annual summer concert by the Vermont Symphony Orchestra.

The inn also has an intriguing equestrian program with about 45 horses available and a variety of in-

struction for riders of all skill levels. There are also guided rides on scenic trails around the lake and up into the mountains.

"It's nice to work somewhere that has so much variety and so much opportunity for outdoor activity," says Hill. "I never get bored and the guests don't either — so they're happy." ❁

MOUNTAIN TOP INN AND RESORT

Guest accommodations: three suites and 26 luxury and classic guest rooms; five rustic, pet-friendly cabins; private chalet rentals.

Room rates: suites and rooms \$150 to \$545, depending on season and room size, with rate approximately \$255 to \$545 during high fall and holiday seasons.

Private chalet homes run from \$275 to \$1,800.

Winter activity rates: approximately \$16 for half-day use of trails, skating rink and sledding hill, to \$19 for a full day. Ski rentals \$16 to \$20. Private cross-country instructions \$55 per person, per hour. Season passes, junior and senior rates available; "Learn to Ski Package," which includes a one-day pass, ski rental and one group lesson, for \$45. Thirty-minute horse-drawn sleigh rides cost \$25 for adults, \$15 for children under 14.



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