



A Dogsled State of Mind

High-spirited huskies drive winter fun at Eden Mills inn



By MICHELLE EDELBAUM
 Photographed by JEFF DICKINSON

A TEAM OF NINE ALASKAN HUSKIES barks and jumps in anticipation, waiting for the signal to go. “Ready, hike!” shouts the musher, releasing the foot brake — and the dogs take off, kicking up sprays of snow in their powerful wake. Their barking subsides, replaced by the swooshing sound of 36 paws thumping on the hard-packed snow as the sled glides smoothly behind them.

The dogs weave through the woods of maple, spruce and balsam trees, over snow-covered frozen creeks, past moose crossings and bobcat corridors. As the dogs charge back toward the touring center barn, their pink tongues flap against jaws that seem to be drawn into big smiles.

After the tour, the dogs are still part of the action as they relax with visitors in the barn, lounging on couches, lying in front of the wood-burning stove and entertaining with tricks. With talents such as mid-air cookie catching and turning doorknobs with their paws, these high-spirited huskies really are the stars of the show.

At Eden Mountain Lodge, winter fun is driven by dogsledding, and guests are encouraged to immerse themselves in the experience by preparing the dogs beforehand, enjoying the ride with them, and feeding and playing with them afterward.

“We offer more than just a ride — we give guests a chance to interact with the friendly dogs,” says owner Jim Blair. “I like to educate the guests before the rides and show the visitors why the dogs enjoy the sport, and offer a sense of their enthusiasm and playfulness.”

For nine years, Blair, 55, has been offering dogsledding tours and lessons over 10 miles of groomed trails near his lodge in Eden Mills in northern Vermont. A former hockey star at Staples High School in Westport, Conn., and a motocross and cross-country ski racer, Blair developed a love of dogsledding from his training for endurance sports. As a way to give his two pets

some exercise while he trained, Blair took up skijoring — where a dog (or horse, or vehicle) pulls a person on skis. “As soon as I tried it, that was it. I was hooked,” he says.

Blair took up racing, eventually becoming a national skijoring champion, and as he bred more huskies, it made sense to train the dogs all together while driving a sled. Breeding increased the size of his kennel further, and soon he had enough dogs to start offering sled tours. Now the operation includes Blair’s girlfriend and fellow musher, Fran Plaisted, and her dogs, and mushers and dogs that Blair contracts from other kennels.

Blair’s love of his dogs sets the tone at Eden, and he places great emphasis on their care. Described by Blair as “free range” huskies, the dogs are not chained during the day but roam in large yards and hang out on colorful doghouses and play structures. At night, some of them sleep with Blair in his living quarters above the touring center while others bunk in a room at the back of the barn. For Blair, the dogs are not just workers but pets and companions.

For guests such as the Donadio family of Clinton, Conn., the dogs are the key to the vacation — and the reason the family has been back four times. “To be able to spend time with the dogs is huge for us,” says Meegan Donadio, visiting with her son and daughter ages 3 and 5. “And once the dogs start running, it’s just so peaceful. It is incredible. It is unlike anything else. It’s nice that you get the full experience — you get to harness the dogs and learn how to do it, and then afterward you can give them treats and water.”

Maureen DeLeo, visiting from Acton, Mass., says the tours are another way to experience the beauty of a Vermont winter. “We’re dog lovers, and since my daughter had a sprained ankle, we were looking for an alternative to skiing. It was an unbelievable experience.”



If you go

Eden Dogsledding and Eden Mountain Lodge, Eden Mills

- Dogsledding: Dogsled rides daily — in winter on snow, in summer on wheels. Also dogsled driving and skijoring lessons. Prices vary.
- Accommodations: The two-story Larkspur Lodge is a log cabin with exposed beams, fieldstone fireplace, mountain views and modern amenities. The single-story Foxglove Cottage features open kitchen and living area, wide pine floors, antiques and a cozy wood-burning stove. Cabin rates start at \$150 per night, two-night minimum
- Information: (802) 635-9070 or www.edendogsledding.com