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FEBRUARY 2016

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# Snow Days



**AN ACTION-PACKED  
FAMILY WEEKEND  
IN NORTH CREEK**

by **CORT RUDDY**  
photographs by **NANCIE BATTAGLIA\***  
*\*Unless otherwise noted*






Skiing, tubing,  
dining and more—  
North Creek's  
positioning itself  
as a premier  
Adirondack winter  
destination.



tubing at North Creek Ski Bowl. Above: Restaurants, cafés and stores like Foothills Antiques and Hudson River Trading Company line North Creek's quaint Main Street.



## **SHE STEADIED HERSELF ABOVE THE FIRST STEEP SECTION OF THE TRAIL. HER EYES WIDENED. SHE SWALLOWED HARD. SHE WAS NERVOUS.**

Why wouldn't she be? An eight-year-old novice skier, up a real mountain for the first time and preparing to go down it.

Then she turned her skis and was on her way.

It's a remarkable thing to watch a child as she conquers a fear and finds success. This one did it by climbing into a gondola to ride up a mountain just so she could try to make it back down. Yet there she was, our sweet Chloe, burdened with trepidation since before she could walk, doing wide turns 3,200 feet up with a view of distant mountains spread out in front of her.

This scene wouldn't have been possible 10 years ago. Not just because Chloe didn't exist then, but because this particular sweeping, high-altitude beginner slope at Gore Mountain, called Ruby Run, did not exist either. Ruby Run, the start of a 2.2-mile, 1,700-foot descent from the summit of Bear Mountain—the second highest peak of four that make up the Gore Mountain ski center—was added in 2006, one of countless upgrades the state-run ski area has seen in the past two decades.

This scene on Bear also seemed improbable just the day before. That's when we dropped Chloe off at the Mountain Adventure Center at Gore, along with her three siblings—12-year-old Maisie, six-year-old Sadie and four-year-old Drew—for a two-hour morning lesson.

On our previous family ski trips, Chloe never felt secure enough to leave the various bunny hills. She went into our family weekend trip to Gore with the simple goal of getting off the bunny hill for good.

As Chloe's two hours of instruction wound down that morning, her instructor—an older skiing Jedi named Dave—determined she was ready to get on her first lift. Not a J-bar, or a T-bar, or a rope tow, but an actual lift.

With Dave by her side, she quivered as the chair swung around behind and scooped her up, taking the two of them halfway up the mountain. He then guided her down a shorter slope called Jamboree as her lesson expired.

In our post-lesson parent debriefing, Dave told us she could use more time on the bunny hill and wasn't ready to go up the lift without an instructor. I figured his advice for

standard instructor cautiousness—you know, liability talk. So after lunch, I decided to take Chloe up the chair lift and down Jamboree myself.

Our adventure didn't end well. She fell getting off the lift and then every few yards going down the hill. Her confidence eroded and her legs tired until, a few hundred yards from the bottom, she morphed into a crying heap, reminiscent of her first ski trip years ago.

**WHEN I TOLD PEOPLE** I was taking our family of six on a weekend ski trip, most looked at me and said, "Good luck with that."

We've skied as a family a few times before, and it hasn't always been successful. My wife and I love to ski. But once our kids started coming along, our skiing happened a little less often. Then it stopped altogether.

A couple years back, with our fourth child able to walk, we decided it was time to become a skiing family.

To take a family skiing, and have fun doing it, you need to consider a few things. First, find places that have robust learn-to-ski programs. Not only so your kids can learn, but so you have a safe place to put them while you try to enjoy the trails yourself.

We look for mountains with group and private lessons, dedicated learning areas, and the ability to teach a variety of ages. You have to research and ask around to find the nuances in each program.

Other family-friendly aspects to consider: a variety of trails for all levels, affordable and familiar food options, and even daycare. Nothing is worse than paying for a full-day lift ticket, only to have one kid throw a fit and end your own skiing before its time.

**THE FIRST THING** that strikes you about Gore Mountain is the sheer size of the place. Not its 3,600-foot altitude, necessarily—though its claimed 2,537-foot vertical drop puts it above most of Vermont's better-known hills—but the sprawling mass that is the entire ski area: Four peaks, nine mountainsides, 15 lifts and 109 trails, totaling 42

miles of combined length and spanning 446 skiable acres. It's one of the bigger places to ski on the East Coast.

People began skiing in North Creek in the 1930s, long before there were lifts or actual ski trails. Locals would drive cars and buses up Pete Gay and Gore Mountains and ski down widened logging roads. In 1935 a tow bar was installed at what would become the North Creek Ski Bowl.

Ski tourism blossomed, fed by visitors taking the "snow trains," then faded as World War II gripped the nation. After years of considering it, the state finally took over the Gore Mountain ski center in 1964, with 14 trails and a double chair lift. A gondola installed three years later carried the growing crowds up the mountain until it was replaced

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by the Northwoods Gondola in 1999. Over the years, more lifts were added, more trails and better snow-making. Most recently, an interconnect linked Gore's main ski area to the historic North Creek Ski Bowl, moving access to the whole resort closer to the village.

Today, it's hard not to feel all that history in North Creek, where the old red gondolas are omnipresent, dangling above the entrances to businesses and decorating lawns.

I counted three on the drive in, and saw another as we walked our crew to Café Sarah on Main Street for breakfast. After egg sandwiches and cream cheese-laden bagels, we set out to ski.

We'd heard that Gore was great for families, that they were doing things right. Like most big hills these days, Gore has a strong ski school and a daycare to make a family feel more comfortable.

We witnessed the effort right when we arrived. Greeters

on the first floor of the Northwoods Lodge, built in 2007, pointed people where they needed to go.

For us, that was Gore's Snow Sports School. We'd decided to enroll all four in the morning group lesson; even the older one could use a refresher course.

At other places we've had lessons, it's up to us to pick up any rented skis and boots, get the kids fully outfitted and then transport them to the lesson area. Which doesn't sound like too much to ask of a parent, but can be a challenge. On more than one occasion, tears flowed, frustrations were publicly aired, and threats of never skiing again were made even before we got out of the rental area.

At Gore's ski school, we dropped the kids off at the desk of the secure child area, and it was up to the instructors to get them into their boots and skis, and to deliver them to the training area—a job we happily relinquished. Trying not to sound shocked, we asked, "So we can go now?"

The instructors nodded and we left. Then we skied. For two whole hours, we skied. Without kids, or diaper bags, or anything.

Helping matters was the swiftness with which we were able to get up the mountain. Despite the multiplying crowd on this comfortably cool and sunny day, the lines moved—a point of pride for Gore. The gondola and a new ultra-fast, four-person chair work hard to keep the lines at the base lodge moving.

By the end of our kids' lessons, our two older girls were ready to ski with us—or at least try. The younger two just wanted to relax. Drew, the boy, had developed a classic case of jelly legs. As an instructor named Scott quipped, "Our job is to tire them out." They did it.

The kids were also starving—their words, not mine.

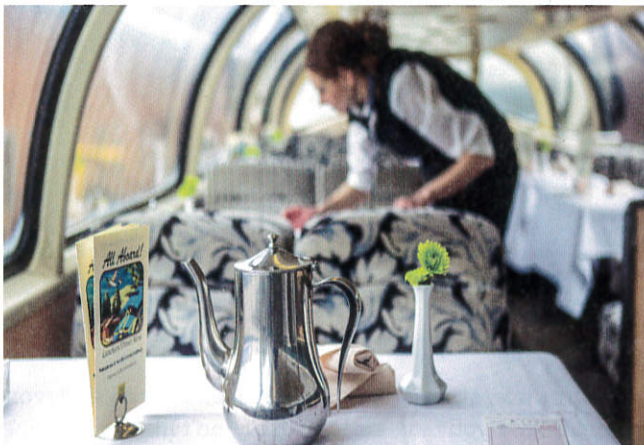
Lunch in the food court taught us a few things families should know. First, the food at the lodge, in the words of Drew, is "awesome." Sadie just held up two thumbs as she chewed her pizza. There were ample options—hot dogs, chicken fingers, fries, paninis—that were filling and tasty.

After downing our meals, the little ones retired to the hotel room with their grandparents—who came to town for the day, trading babysitting for dinner on us. My wife and I then set out to ski with our two oldest.

That's when Chloe's disastrous Jamboree run almost derailed her weekend. Once the crying heap of a child was safely down the hill, her mom retreated with her to the bunny slope for confidence building, while Maisie and I explored more of the mountain.

It's easy to get lost in all the options Gore Mountain has to offer, but we stuck to the slopes we both could handle. About half of Gore's 109 trails are marked intermediate. Blue trails dominate the face of Bear Mountain and the North Side area, both with an ample array of choices for families. The day we visited conditions were perfect, and slopes not that crowded considering all the cars in the parking lot.

There's no shortage of more challenging trails, either. Some 40 percent of Gore's trails are black diamond or tough-



The author and his family at Izzy's Market & Deli. Left: Scenes from the Saratoga & North Creek Railway's Snow Train.

er, with the notoriously steep double-black trails The Rumor and Lies descending from the summit of Gore proper. Add to that a total of 27 glades—many opened in the 2014–2015 season—and seven freestyle areas and terrain parks, and you can see how the diverse resort offered well more than we could manage in a single weekend.

We did what we could, then surrendered around the fire pit on the giant patio. Maisie warmed herself, while I enjoyed a well-earned beverage.

Despite the setbacks, it was a good day.

**AS WITH MOST** weekend excursions, Saturday served as our only real night out. The first night, we stuffed our faces with takout pizza in the hotel room. So the second night we wanted to dine.

Of the many struggles a family faces on any trip, the most recurring involves finding family-friendly food. Many restaurants in resort towns cater to couples, making it hard to find places suitable for kids. It takes more than just rolling a high chair

**ALL ABOARD!**  
**THE SARATOGA & NORTH CREEK RAILWAY**  
 offers year-round passenger service between Saratoga Springs and North Creek. In winter it operates as the Snow Train, a throwback to the 1930s and '40s, when visitors rode the rails to winter fun in the North Country. Today's Snow Train offers classic dome cars with on-board dining, and shuttles to Gore Mountain at the ready. See schedules and routes or make reservations by calling (877) 726-7245 or visiting [www.sncrr.com](http://www.sncrr.com).

over and passing out crayons; eating with children in public requires certain amenities, like spill-proof cups, background noise and bread for the table early in the meal. It's also nice to find places that include options beyond the kids' menu triumvirate of grilled cheese, chicken fingers and mac-n-cheese.

Considering the size of Gore and the crowds found there some days, there aren't as many restaurants to choose from as you might expect. But there are some good ones. We wound up at a place highly regarded by Gore Mountain regulars: Basil & Wick's.

The restaurant and bar occupy a cavernous building south of town reminiscent of a ski lodge, with a high ceiling that screams Alpine and an oversized antler-strewn chandelier hanging from the center peak. Murals depicting Gore's history wrap the walls. And, on our visit, ski-jacketed craft-beer drinkers crowded the bar, with wind-burnt cheeks and pale goggle marks around their eyes.



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## SKI, RIDE AND SLIDE AT GORE MOUNTAIN

**GORE MOUNTAIN** is typically open for the season seven days a week, 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.—with twilight operations on weekends and holidays—from mid-November through late April.

Daily lift-ticket prices vary from free for kids ages six and under, to a maximum of \$83. Call (518) 251-2411 or see [www.goremountain.com](http://www.goremountain.com) to learn more about multi-day tickets and rates for rentals, lessons and season passes.

Gore Mountain operates the North Creek Ski Bowl, with a new half-pipe for snowboarders and night skiing at the foot of Little Gore. The bowl also has lift-service tubing—children must be 36 inches or taller; tickets are \$18 for two hours.

Gore's Snow Phone (518) 251-5026 relays the latest snow conditions, open trails and upcoming events.

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As we waited for our table, six-year-old Sadie looked around and worried, “Some fancy places give you mac-and-cheese I don’t like. I sure hope this place has Kraft.”

I could tell from the menu and the plates coming out of the kitchen that Basil & Wick’s has a couple of goals, one of which is to feed its guests meals that will make them pass out after a day of skiing. They also make an obvious effort to cover the spectrum, from comfort food classics to slightly more innovative cuisine, much of it with Adirondack flair, like the Eagles Nest Cedar Plank Salmon, prepared with a maple glaze.

Feeling like a hungry caveman, I was drawn to the Pork Osso Buco, while my wife opted for the Brandy Peppercorn Steak. I also noticed a Lobster Mac on the regular menu and wondered if that meant Sadie would be disappointed by some fancy, homemade version of mac-n-cheese from the kids’ menu, which only included the triumvirate, plus hotdogs and pasta.

We also ordered appetizers. Thank the cheese gods we did. The Bleu Cheese Crispy Chips were likely the tastiest thing we ate all weekend: homemade, thick-cut chips topped with blue cheese, a cream sauce and crumbled bacon. Did I mention the guilt? It was worth it.

Overall, our meals were well-prepared, reasonably priced and filling. Chloe ate her bowl of pasta. Maisie raved about the fish and chips—from the adult menu, as she’s graduated from ordering off kiddie menus. And Sadie’s mac-n-cheese was Kraft. A victory.

Of course, Drew fell asleep at the table before taking a bite. Luckily, he filled up on bread first. We packed up his meal to go.

That night, with the kids comatose from the mix of exertion, mountain air and food—and with the grandparents willing to stay a little longer—my wife and I went out for a drink.

**AS GORE ADDED TRAILS** and expanded into the snow park, new businesses, new ideas and new people arrived—or returned—to North Creek.



Gore Mountain first attracted skiers in the 1930s; in the last two decades the resort has undergone a steady expansion, drawing skiers and snowboarders of all abilities.

Two of the relatively recent additions were on our agenda for the evening: barVino and the Barking Spider. BarVino opened in 2008, bringing an upscale tapas restaurant with a chef-inspired nightly menu to the quiet streets of North Creek. My wife and I had a drink there before it closed for the evening, choosing from their extensive collection of wines and more than 60 beers. Then we followed the bartender's advice and walked down the block to the Spider.

We entered the long, thin bar and found a mixed crowd of local ski instructors, out-of-towners and staff from establishments that had closed earlier. While some patrons chose local beers, one from Schroon Lake's Paradox Brewery and another from Davidson Brothers brewery in Glens Falls, several others held cans of Pabst, pulled from a metal bin behind the bar.

I inquired and was handed a can for just two bucks. "Pabst is my number-one seller," owner Tim McGraw explained. "That's to attract the guys who work on the mountain. I've found that advertising in print isn't as effective as keeping those guys happy," he said.

Tim's one of the many new business owners in town who has a long history with Gore. "I grew up skiing on Gore Mountain," he said. "My mom worked there for not quite 20 years when I was a kid."

Tim bought the space and opened the Barking Spider about six years ago. Inside there's a shuffleboard table and a long bar; out back there's a deck.

He was working in Glens Falls and thinking about starting a business when members of the North Creek chamber of commerce approached him about opening a new place in

the village. Now he's part of the renewed energy that can be seen and felt up and down Main Street.

But of all the changes in North Creek, the most drastic may have occurred at the Alpine Lodge. Sharon Taylor and her husband, Greg, bought the Alpine in 2005. It was an eyesore. The original motor lodge had an exterior motif—square, stout and plain—that reeked of 1960s modern. They remade the old motor inn top to bottom, literally.

"At the time the Ski Bowl development was just starting to happen," Sharon said. "We were interested in bringing some impetus to what we felt was a cute little town that has a lot of potential."

They added a second floor to the center of the lodge, creating the look of a building you'd expect in an Adirondack ski village. The interior saw major renovations as well, including new suites perfect for families like ours. Their goal was to make the Alpine an affordable place to stay for families, couples and ski enthusiasts alike.

Our room for the weekend, called the Santanoni, was around the back of the lodge on the ground floor with private parking. A two-bedroom suite, with kitchenette and living area, it certainly offered enough space for our family.

Like Tim, and seemingly everyone else in town, Sharon has a history with North Creek and the mountain. "I learned to ski at Gore," she said. "My parents would drive me and my brother up and drop us off, and then come back and pick us up at four o'clock."

She then worked as a ski instructor after college, alongside Greg. She's one of many people fully invested in this town, its success and its future. "Cer-

(Continued on page 56)

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tainly Gore has expanded greatly and the town itself has definitely had a renaissance with a lot of new shops, restaurants and bars," said Sharon. "It definitely seems to be bucking the trend of a lot of small towns in the Adirondacks, in that it is experiencing growth, and we're real excited." (The Taylors also operate a high-end retreat 25 minutes away on Friends Lake, called Fern Lodge, a romantic and peaceful getaway for couples. No place for kids—especially not ours.)

Like many Adirondack villages, North Creek is a four-season destination: In summer, vacationers and second-home owners flock here for hiking and paddling. In fall, there are the "leaf peepers," as a chef at barVino described after he finished his shift. In spring and summer, rafters and kayakers take to the Hudson River to get their dose of adrenaline. And then there's fishing.

As much as skiing is central to its identity, these other activities are part of it too, as depicted in the village's mosaic mural along Main Street across from Café Sarah.

**SUNDAY MORNING.** after pancakes at Marsha's Family Restaurant, an old-style diner next door to the hotel, we headed to Gore again. Our last morning of skiing consisted of more group lessons for the two little ones, more parental time for the older ones, and Chloe's triumphant conquest of Bear Mountain. Something clicked for her; she was really and truly skiing.

We finished our time on the mountain with a group ski on one of the beginner areas, meant for new snowboarders and novice skiers. The kids didn't want to leave. But we had to; we had something else in store.

For lunch we swung into Izzy's Market & Deli on Main Street for sandwiches. Izzy's is what happens when an old general store gets taken over by culinary hipsters, with maple syrup sharing shelf space with Sriracha and canned curry paste.

After a stellar meal of homemade soup and specialty sandwiches—in-

cluding the best Cuban I've had outside of south Florida—it was time for one more adventure, an afternoon hurtling down slopes in inner tubes.

Of the many recent additions at the North Creek Ski Bowl—which now includes night skiing and a half-pipe—the one that brought my family the most joy was the tube park, nestled into the foot of Little Gore Mountain.

You get your ticket, grab a tube and then get dragged up the hill by a J-bar contraption while sitting on your cushion of rubber and air. At the top, you mount up, talk smack to the tubers in the other lanes and begin the harrowingly fast descent.

To say our kids just loved it would be an injustice.

For little ones who spent most of their skiing time in ski school, tubing was when they got to achieve the true speed possible in this gravity-induced, Alpine environment. As a parent, though, it can be discomfoting to see your offspring flying down a hill at that speed. But they were laughing the whole time: the second they'd get to the bottom, they'd sprint with their tube across the snow-covered expanse to the J-bar for another trip up.

Drew loved every part of tubing and he spanked me down the hill the few times he'd wait long enough for his old man to settle into the lane next to him.

The kids ran and laughed and played and raced, and burned off whatever energy they had left, which wasn't much. When we finished we packed up and prepared to leave North Creek and Gore Mountain behind.

**A SHORT TIME** into the trip home, as we made our way south through the mountains, Chloe said, "I wish I was skiing." Drew responded, "I wish I was tubing."

There is something to be said for watching your children struggle before they succeed, to work for something, to redeem themselves, to take advantage of that second chance. North Creek seems a place taking advantage of its latest chance, and

## SNOW DAYS

becoming a ski village more appropriate to the quality of the mountain it lies beneath.

We did make one last stop before we left North Creek behind. Our visit happened to be a few days before Chloe's birthday. While packing up her bag, she announced what she wanted: her own pair of ski goggles.

When we passed a little shack in the village called the Goggle Outlet, I did a U-turn in the road so Mom and Chloe could go in to get our new skier some goggles.

They emerged a few minutes later with a cool blue pair. And she wore them all the way home. 🍷

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**Cort Ruddy is a writer who lives and works in Syracuse, New York. He blogs about fatherhood and family at Ruddy Bits.com.**

### Trip Tips

The author visited the following places in North Creek, but they're just a sampling of the area's offerings. See Gore Mountain Region Chamber of Commerce's website, [www.gorechamber.com](http://www.gorechamber.com), for more options.

**Alpine Lodge**, 246 Main Street  
(518) 251-2451  
[www.adirondackalpinelodge.com](http://www.adirondackalpinelodge.com)

**barVino**, 272 Main Street  
(518) 251-5533, [www.barvino.net](http://www.barvino.net)

**Basil & Wick's Restaurant & Bar**  
3195 Route 28, (518) 251-3100  
[www.basilandwicks.com](http://www.basilandwicks.com)

**Café Sarah**, 260 Main Street  
(518) 251-5959  
[www.cafesarahnorthcreek.com](http://www.cafesarahnorthcreek.com)

**Izzy's Market & Deli**, 282 Main Street  
(518) 251-3000, see Izzy's on Facebook

**Marsha's Family Restaurant**  
268 Main Street, (518) 251-5750  
[www.marshasfamilyrestaurant.com](http://www.marshasfamilyrestaurant.com)

**The Barking Spider**, 302 Main Street  
(518) 251-9911