

ESCAPE

FIVE PAGES OF THE BEST TRAVEL IN THE WORLD



FIND OUT WHY NORTH WALES IS WELL WORTH A VISIT...

The White choice

New Hampshire's White Mountains offer something for everyone, discovers **Lynn Houghton**

CRUNCH, crunch. The fresh snow underfoot is compacted just enough so that, with crampons attached to my boots, I can walk on it without sinking to my knees. Thankfully, the white stuff around the lake has been trekked on in the last few days. Even though spring is around the corner, the snow hasn't melted, the air is still crisp and incredibly cold.

My hiking friends and I are taking

a stroll around a small lake near the Appalachian Mountain Club's Highland Center at Crawford Notch, in the heart of New Hampshire's White Mountains.

Even with the extra grip on my boots, if I don't step on the right spot, I sink and am submerged in a drift. Soon, I notice tiny black dots on the surface of the snow, which turn out to be - wait for it - snow fleas! "They feed on the detritus and dead grass of the trail," our intrepid

guide, Mitra Karimian, informs us. "Keep a look out for paw prints, too, as we have other small animals about, such as red squirrels."

Apparently, beavers frequent this area, as do black bears and moose. But thankfully, we are close enough to the lodge and human activity that it is unlikely we will see a moose (notoriously shy), and we are noisy enough to scare away most bears.

There is no doubt that skiing is the main draw in winter for visitors to the

White Mountains, and understandably so. First, these mountains are a place of natural intrinsic beauty, so there are gorgeous views for winter sports lovers as they take to the slopes. The area is covered with vast forests, and with farms and villages dotting the landscape, the scenery has a uniquely New England feel.

Secondly, there are great quirky hotels and restaurants to be found here, notably the Christmas Farm Inn, which is New Hampshire's →



HIT THE SLOPES: The area has amazing skiing facilities

FEELING FESTIVE?: Visit the Christmas Farm Inn



oldest and apparently haunted lodgings.

The White Mountains may not have the soaring peaks of the Rockies, but what they lack in height, they make up for with charm and a fascinating history going back 300 years to the Revolutionary War period.

Last, and best of all, the prices for skiing are a fraction of what they are in Aspen, Whistler, Lake Tahoe and other western US resorts.

Keen to discover what the area's slopes have to offer, we head out to the Loon Mountain resort in the town of Lincoln. Only a two-hour drive from Boston, Loon Mountain has 11 lifts (one a gondola) and 61 trails.

On ascending the peak in the enclosed gondola, I notice a significant 'bunny hill' which is ideal for younger skiers. Other family-friendly activities such as ice skating, snowshoeing and a zip-lining course are also available.

But it is the rock bottom ski lift and rental prices that will really win mammy and da's approval. You

can purchase a one-day adult lift pass for just \$85 midweek and \$95 for weekends. A child's pass (ages 6-12) costs \$65 midweek and \$75 at weekends. Rental pricing for a ski package or snowboards is around \$45 for one day (adults) and \$33 for juniors (7-12), while multi-day rentals are also available.

After a morning on the slopes, we stop in for a bite at Woodstock Inn Station & Brewery - a couple of miles from the Loon Mountain resort centre. Housed in what was once the rail station, the inn boasts unique antique decor throughout and is renowned for both its microbrewery and its restaurant's generous portion sizes. I heartily recommend the Fish n' Chips.

Our next adventure begins a few miles away, in Conway, where we try



SCARILY GOOD: The inn is said to be haunted

something truly, mind-blowingly crazy - Snowmobiling!

Led by Beech, of Northern Extremes (northernextremes.snowmobiling.com) and his support person, Grayson, we head out on a 10-mile ride over trails groomed and maintained for snowmobilers.

Since I don't drive regularly, I decide to be a passenger, but still need to be kitted out with all the gear. Struggling into snow boots and waterproofs, I then have an enormous motorcycle helmet squeezed onto my head. I'm finally ready.

It doesn't take long for everyone to get the hang of these machines. Speeds of up to 45 mph can be attained, but we

are not allowed to go any faster. The snowmobiles are easy to manoeuvre and can take gentle corners.

On reaching flat ground a few hundred feet above the valley, everyone turns off their machines for a short breather. While taking a few moments to admire the view over the Great North Woods, one of my mates throws a snowball that hits me in the solar plexus. Grr...

I respond by throwing a snowball at his head. Soon, tiny white cannonballs are flying all around. In the melee, everyone ends up falling to the ground in fits of laughter. Since we are



AN ICE IDEA: Snowmobiling was great fun

splayed out on the ground anyway, it seems a great time to make snow angels. Such fun!

The next day we hit the slopes at the Attitash resort (attitash.com), another White Mountain favourite that has 11 lifts and 68 trails for cross country skiers. This beautiful resort is particularly well known for its ski and snowboard instruction. It also

has the best price for a lift pass anywhere... only \$40 per day for novice skiers. Adults passes cost from

Come for snow, but stay for the friendly natives and great food

\$60, while junior (7-17 years) prices start at \$45.

Want a break from all that snow? A short drive away from Attitash is scenic North Conway Village, which boasts a main street full of boutique shops and cute cafés.

But if you're looking for real bargains, the place to shop is the Settlers Green Outlet Village (settlersgreen.com). Stores here include top American brands such as Ralph Lauren, Banana Republic,

Levi's and Timberland. And here's the best news: shopping in New Hampshire is tax free!

A stay at the Mountain View Grand Resort (mountainviewgrand.com) is delightful. This historic hotel, built in 1856, is on the register of Historic Hotels of America and has 145 rooms. Its ancient lift requires an employee to operate it. Brilliant!

The hotel has a whole range of activities on site, including snowshoeing, cross country skiing and tubing (extra charges apply). There is also a working farm that has sheep, goats, rabbits, hens, roosters, and llamas. Guests are encouraged to come along in the mornings to have a tour.

But the most exhilarating option is the chance to be a lumberjack for a day and try your hand at axe throwing.

The resort's Activities Director, Elaine Frenette, runs this activity and does so as a competition.

First, participants practise throwing an axe and learn to do it properly (it's astonishingly easy). Then, the head-to-head competition

begins to see who can secure a coveted trophy. To be 'in it to win it', hotel guests must shout out war cries such as, "My name is Ted. I am from Ireland and am a true patriot. I must live free or die!" which tends to get one's adrenalin going just enough to hit the target. I was truly miserable at axe throwing, but did manage to secure a third-place medal, which was made from a bit of birch tree.

Another included event at the hotel is a complimentary afternoon wine tasting in the hotel's 1865 Wine Cellar. It's a lovely venue, where guests can also book for an evening meal at an additional charge.

Come to New Hampshire for the snow, but stay for the friendly natives and great food. With so much to experience, you can't help but have a whale of a time. +



DELIGHTFUL: The Mountain View Grand Resort

Getting there...

For further information on New Hampshire check out www.visitnh.gov

Norwegian airlines fly a year-round direct service between Ireland and Boston, with fares starting from €129pp each way. For more details, visit www.norwegian.com/ie

Prices at the Mountain View Grand Resort start at \$189 for a midweek (Sun-Thurs) two-night stay in a classic room with one king-size bed. Visit www.mountainviewgrand.com

A family of four (two adults and two children under 13) have a number of options at the Christmas Farm Inn:

- Carriage House Suites with a queen-size pull-out sofa bed range from \$169 to \$249 per night, including a full American breakfast.
- Barn loft conversion studios can sleep families of 6-8 people and range from \$159 to \$219 per night, including a full American breakfast.

Couples also have a number of options available:

- Traditional Inn rooms with a king-size bed range from \$99 to \$169 per night, including American breakfast.
- Carriage House Suites range from \$169 to \$249 per night, also including a full American breakfast. Visit www.christmasfarminn.com