



Ready and

Snowmobile riders travel through the tunnel under state highway Route 16 in Erroll, N.H., on the trail to Umbagog Lake.

rarin' to ride

Snowmobiling family hits the trail

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY DAN GOULD

Breathtaking winter scenery and the raw outdoor experience of touring in the mountains are what draw snowmobile enthusiasts north at a time many others retreat south.

The search for snow-covered trails sends conga lines of pickup trucks with snowmobiles in tow to the Great North Woods of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. This region, just south of the Canadian border, is known to have snow on the ground when more populated areas still have green lawns.

At midweek in February, signs on hotels and cabins read "No Vacancy." Parking lots are packed with snowmobiles planted in front of doorways like the station wagons of August. This is peak season for trail riding, and if you didn't make reservations before New Year's, you could be out of luck.

Cell phones don't work and high-speed Internet connections are nonexistent, but that is of little concern to those drawn here, where the snow is regularly measured in feet.

It's 8 a.m. and the temperature outside our cabin in the small town of Errol, N.H., reads 10 degrees, perfect for a 150-mile snowmobile ride.

My wife, Patty, and I have traveled in the area countless times, but have never brought our children; they were simply too young until now. After a few years of riding on the backseat at home, Danny, 9, and Brent, 7, are finally ready for a trip on a large, northern trail system, where speeds approach 45 mph, the legal limit.

Getting the family dressed and ready for an outdoor excursion can take a half hour, but wearing several layers of polypropylene under a snowmobile suit ensures that the kids stay warm. To ensure everyone's sanity, be certain that they use the bathroom before getting suited up!

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Patty Gould fastens the helmet on her son, Danny.



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A few short pulls of the rope and the Ski-Doos fire to life. With helmets in place, we head west on Trail 18 to Umbagog Lake on the New Hampshire-Maine border.

The kids' eyes bulge as a bridge takes us across the Androscoggin River, and then slips into an underground tunnel, below the state highway. The excitement in their squeaky voices is heard over the two-way radios that we have installed in our helmets.

The evergreen-lined trails, which are groomed by heavy equipment, are as smooth as glass thanks to the local club that maintains them. We arrive at the frozen lake, 10 miles in length with more than 8,500 acres, and find a spot sheltered from the wind to take a snack break. The kids play tag and have a snowball fight, rolling around in the white stuff like puppies in the mud.

Snowmobiling is all about destinations. Riders tour the countryside and visit tourist

attractions — natural and man-made. Buffalo Ridge Trail is one hot spot, where visitors park their sleds and watch the bison graze on bales of hay in a scene straight out of a western movie. It's not unusual to see more than 25 people visiting at any one time.

From there, we travel north on a winding, narrow trail covered in animal tracks. Putting along at 20 mph, we spot a half dozen deer along a stream. Bringing the snow machines to a stop, we trade stares with the deer before they get bored with us and slowly fade into the camouflage of heavy woods.

The fuel gauge is near empty, necessitating a run into town. Here, snowmobiles dominate the parking lots of restaurants and gas stations leave sections of the driveway unplowed, allowing sleds to pull right up to the pumps. Customers slip their credit cards into the pump and fill the 10-gallon tanks with regular. Twenty miles per gallon is now the norm as modern engine tech-



Snowmobile gauges and controls would be familiar to anyone who had ridden a motorcycle. Riders can easily cover 200 miles in a day.





From far left, Joey DeMarco and Brent Gould take in the view at Dixville Peak; Debbie Pierce snaps a photo of her children, Justin and Jessica; sleds parked at the Balsams Grand Resort Hotel in Dixville Notch; below, snow-covered evergreens along the way.



nology has increased efficiency while meeting or surpassing EPA standards.

It is now late afternoon and the sun is starting to drop behind the mountains. Once darkness arrives the mercury plunges in increments of 10, so we made tracks back to our cabin, The Great North Woods Get-A-Way, in Erroll.

The next day brings bright sun and temperatures near 20 degrees. The snow squeaks underfoot as we load the luggage compartments of the sleds with food, water, spare gloves and hats. The kids are totally pumped, as they know we are headed to Dixville Notch. At 3,480, the peak is the highest vantage point in the area and the view is spectacular.

Long sections of trail are almost 60 feet wide, boulevard like, and could be confused with sections of the Mass Pike. We cruise at over 40 mph in comfort that would rival a fine sedan. There is plenty of room for oncoming traffic and we wave to others as we pass.

A trail marker signals that we are approaching an intersection, and we stop to check our direction. The intersections are well posted with route numbers and tourist information. Are you hungry? Do you need a repair? Just follow the interstate-like signs. With a trail map in hand, it's nearly impossible to get lost.

A sharp right onto Route 134 and a quick trip up a long hill delivers sledders onto the "Peak," where the sky is crystal clear and the view is endless. Too steep and remote to access by foot, there is a festive feeling at this elevation as everyone knows that this is a view only enjoyed from on board an iron dog.

Strangers are sharing stories of their day's adventure. I overhear someone say "I'll take a picture of you, if you take one of me" and cameras are swapped back and forth. Debbie Pierce of Suffield, Conn., takes a photo of her kids among the snow-wrapped trees for next year's Christmas card. If it weren't for lunch calling, we

would have stayed for hours.

The Balsam's Grand Resort Hotel sits on the other side of the peak, in the notch itself, surrounded by mountains. Founded in 1866 as a destination resort, the Balsams has more than 15,000 acres and is open year-round, offering elegant accommodations and a restaurant that draws snowmobilers like magnet north directs a compass.

The eatery is packed with more than 30 snow travelers, who remove their helmets and heavy suits before warming up next to the fireplace while waiting for lunch. Much to my delight, the kids act like perfect gentlemen, remembering to say please and thank you to the wait staff. Getting dressed and going back out is a challenge after eating a big meal, but we manage and are on our way.

After an hour of travel, we decide to take a break. My youngest son takes a short nap in the sun while the rest of us just lie in the

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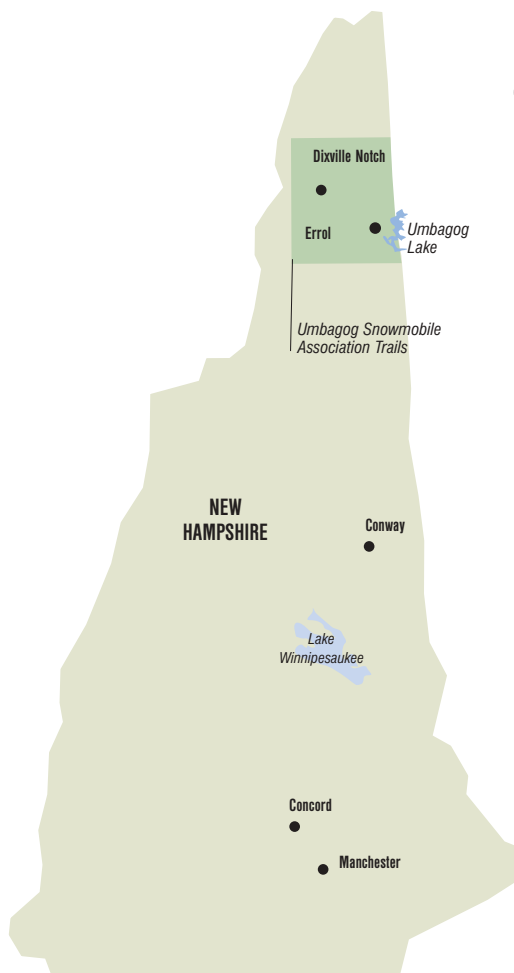
snow in a small field, doing little more than daydreaming. An eagle glides overhead, hypnotizing us further.

It has been four days without phones, computers or video games, just quiet time with the family, a rarity in most households.

The last day on the trail seemed to be the shortest and we suddenly realize that we are about to run out of sunlight. Within an hour we are back at the cabin, our last night's stay before the drive home. Snowmobiling is a physical sport, lots of body English is needed to steer the 500-pound machines. It's more like riding a horse than a Harley. My wife and I sit back on the couch, exhausted from days on the trail. It's a good feeling.

The kids are still full of energy, clobbering each other in a pillow fight. After a few minutes they stop for a quick breath and ask if we can come back next year. "Next year?" we tease them. "You want to go again?" They both scream, "Yeah!" at the top of their lungs.

Winter is the warmest time for our family. **W**



Getting started

Want to go snowmobiling?

- Snowmobiles vary in price; new ones retail from \$4,500 to \$11,000.
- The used sled market offers great deals, with quality machines selling as low as \$2,500. Snowmobile rentals and guided tours are available in many areas, rental prices typically start at \$200 per day.
- Age limits of riders vary by state; some require minors to complete a snowmobile safety course. Be sure to check before planning a trip.
- Anyone new to snowmobiling should consider taking a safety course. Contact a state snowmobile association for information.
- Join a snowmobile club and learn even more!

For information about snowmobiling in New England visit:

- Snowmobile Association of Massachusetts: www.sledmass.com
- Maine Snowmobile Association: www.mesnow.com
- New Hampshire Snowmobile Association: www.nhsa.com
- Vermont Association of Snow Travelers: www.vast.org

To learn more about snowmobiling equipment and safety:

- Gosnowmobiling.org
- www.snowmobilers.org/saferider

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