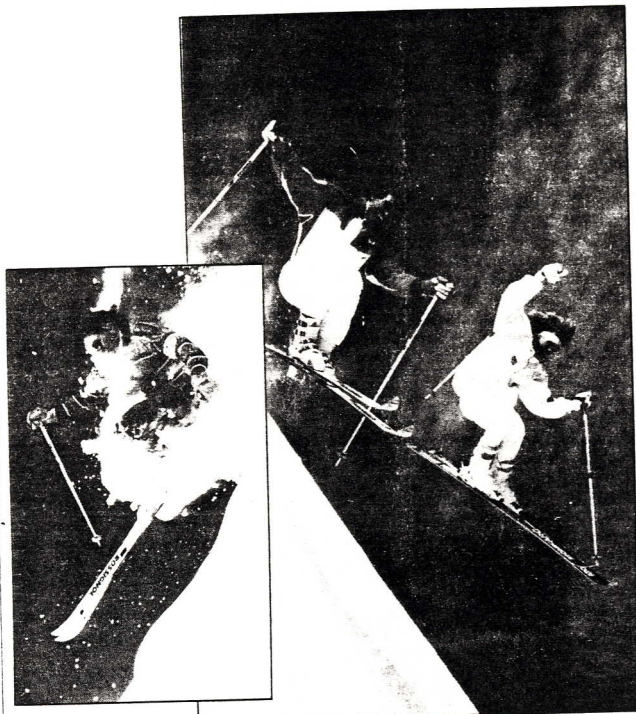


N.E.'s toughest slopes not for the faint of heart



Skiers enjoy the challenges of area slopes.

by **Randy Ross**/Special to the Journal

Many of New England's most difficult ski slopes will not be found on slick, four-color trail maps. Many have no apres-ski facilities; some never see a ski patrol, snow groomer or snowmaker. Get caught on others, and the ski patrol may revoke your \$30 lift ticket.

The Boston Business Journal recently asked several ski experts which New England trails they considered the toughest. The experts ranged from the ski director for the East's top ski team to an ex-US Ski Team member to an 81-year-old slalom champion who has lived at the top of Mount Washington in New Hampshire.

Factors contributing to a ski trail's difficulty included steepness and narrowness; number and size of obstacles such as moguls, rocks and waterfalls; weather conditions; and potential for loss of life, limb and lift ticket.

Ski challenges

In general, the non-ski-area slopes located at Mount Washington were ranked New England's toughest. Other off-trail trails also noted were lesser-known varieties such as Paradise at Mad River Glen, with its 10-foot frozen waterfall, and the Church at Sugarbush, both located in Vermont.

Mount Washington, located in the White Mountain National Forest and New England's tallest peak, measures 6288 feet high. The mountain, however, is not actually a ski area: There are no ski lifts, no instructors and no discos or slopeside bars. To ski any of the "trails," individuals must hike and climb several miles into the woods with ski equipment on their backs. The climb can take several hours, and many skiers hike the afternoon before and camp in lean-tos before skiing the following day.

Tuckerman's Ravine on the east side comprises Mount Washington's most popular group of trails and is often considered the ultimate ski challenge. "The Headwall [trail] is a 500- to 600-foot cliff that literally fills in with snow by springtime," said Steve Lathrop, former US Ski Team member and president of his own skiing and windsurfing company.

The slope is so steep that skiers' hips and elbows touch the snow as they turn. Also, because of the extreme pitch, "People who fall go straight to the bottom; some have to be carted out," he said. There have been about 12 skier fatalities in the area during the last 50 years, according to the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) in Gorham, N.H.

A trail running off the side of the ravine, Hillman's Highway is also considered extremely difficult, said Ned Therrien of the White Mountain Forest division of the US Forest Service. He described the trail as narrow, steep and lined with rocks and trees—not a good spot for fall.

In addition to the steepness of the trails, Tuckerman's presents other challenges. Though most skiing takes place in the spring, when snow has filled the ravine, the temperatures can change rapidly. "You may be skiing in a T-shirt and shorts in 50 degrees; then the sun dips behind the mountain, and in 20 minutes the temperature drops to the 20s," said Peter Crane of the AMC.

Crane also said that in the spring the sun melts the snow, creating streams that run under the trails. The snow eventually begins to crack, forming wide crevasses on some of the slopes. An unsuspecting skier could fall into a crevasse, land in icy water and develop hypothermia, a potentially fatal chilling of the body. In the spring, skiers must also beware of potential avalanches, Crane said.

On your own

Tuckerman's Ravine, however, does have snow rangers patrolling the area to alert skiers of potential dangers and to deal with injuries.

Other trails that are less popular may be more difficult than Tuckerman's and more dangerous because there is no ski patrol, according to Alber Sise, who has lived at the top of Mount Washington and competed in the first US slalom competition in the 1930s. He said that the Great Gulf on the north shoulder of the mountain and

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Ammonoosuc Ravine to the west may be more challenging.

These slopes, in addition to being steep, narrow and lined with rocks and trees, are in remote areas. Not only will a skier be more exhausted after hiking to the trail, but the locations are not patrolled. "You are out in the wild and on your own if you fall and get hurt," Sise said.

AMC's Crane said that a person who is injured at Tuckerman's Ravine could be evacuated for medical assistance within two to three hours. "In Great Gulf, it could take three times as long," he said.

Other options

Skiers looking for a less risky challenge will find it at the Church at Sugarbush and Paradise at Mad River Glen.

The Church acquired its name because skiers may be tempted to pray before heading down the "trail," one expert said. Located near the Heaven's Gate triple chair lift, the Church begins on a rock cliff and is narrow, said George Frick, a former ski instructor at Sugarbush and the assistant manager of the Ski Market in Braintree. "You have to ski between a lot of rocks and trees," Frick said. The trail, which is generally known only to veterans of Sugarbush, derives some of its mystique from the fact that people may be fined or have their tickets confiscated for skiing the areas. Frick added that skiers injured on Church may be billed up to \$3000 if the ski patrol has to evacuate them.

Skiers in search of unconventional trails with unconventional obstacles may be interested in the Paradise trail at Mad River Glen, which begins at the top of a 10-foot frozen waterfall, Frick said. A video at the Boston Ski Show showed one skier cascading down the waterfall on his backside. But after having enjoyed the experience, he shook himself off and pushed onward.

Killington's Outerlimits trail and three slopes at Stowe also were top picks for difficulty. Outerlimits, known for its moguls and steepness, presents an additional challenge during holidays as the trail is inevitably crowded with skiers, said Lathrop.

Lathrop also noted Stowe's Starr, Lifeline and National trails for difficulty. He said these may be even tougher than Outerlimits because of the narrowness. Wider trails, such as Outerlimits, allow for more gradual turns. Narrow slopes also have tougher terrain, because the trails tend to be groomed less because it is more difficult to get machinery on them.

Ultimate challenge

Following the traditional January thaw, Lathrop said the weather turns bitter cold again, and the upper part of these Stowe slopes develop large ice patches. Stowe's heavy winds often blow away the surface snow, leaving the ice exposed. "The ice provides the ultimate challenge," he said.

For skiers interested in racing, Upper F.I.S. at Sugarbush is considered the toughest slalom course in new England, according to Chip LaCasse, director of skiing at the University of Vermont, the top ski team in the East for the last 13 seasons. LaCasse said the criteria he looks for in a tough slalom course is similar to what an elite skier would look for on an expert slope: steepness and difficult terrain.

LaCasse said he has his teams train at the Chin Clip trail at Stowe and various trails at Pico, which is located near Killington but lacks the crowds.

Still, deciding which slope is the most difficult in New England depends on the skier. Sise said he could not be sure that Tuckerman's Ravine was more difficult than Killington's Outerlimits. He said the mogul fields at Killington were difficult for him because he is older and no longer has the "rubber knees" needed to negotiate the 4-foot bumps.

"Each area has a slope that is considered very tough," he said. Sise added, however, that the steeper trails on Mount Washington do have the stronger fear factor. "When you fall you just keep going and don't know what you will hit—rocks, trees..." □