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Getting to a five star yurt

Wren Werten
December 17, 2003



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After racing through my day at breakneck speed in an effort to leave work early, it was a miracle I only forgot my gloves. Our group of four was headed for a belated birthday celebration for myself and Mike DeMino at the Tennessee Pass Cookhouse, and we were late.

There are worse things a person could forget on a nighttime nordic adventure - but not many. Those who always have the right gear call DeMino an over-packer. Chronically forgetful, I call him a friend to those - almost always me - in need. He found some extra gloves in his pack and tossed them my way.

The Cookhouse has become a birthday tradition for us. During the winter, it's accessible only by snowshoe, skis or snowmobile. Diners begin their adventure at the Piney Creek Nordic Center, located to the right of the Ski Cooper parking lot. There, diners receive cross country ski equipment or snowshoes for the one mile of trail that stands between them and a four-course meal. Those unable to transport themselves to the Cookhouse have options, too.

"As long as they're willing to hang out on the back of a snowmobile for a mile, we can get them there," assured Paul Cox, Piney Creek Nordic Center employee.

For those wishing to prolong the adventure, there's a series of interlocking trails surrounding the area. We usually arrive early so we can laugh at each other that much longer. In our group, Kari Corbin is the skilled one, with DeMino a close second. As unstable as fawns taking their first steps, my husband and I - snowboarders, of course - have more fun than ability. But that's a minor detail when you're skinning through the forest on a narrow swath of snow, anticipating the wine and food to come.

We started off on Larry's Loop and made our way to Griz - what a bear. (I employed that neat trick, sliding down the hill backwards.) From there we took the quick Fritz's Freeway, and then on to the Cookhouse, a yurt with a large deck. By the time we parked our skis at the yurt, we felt as if we'd earned our supper.

Our arrival on the deck coincided with the sunset, and we lingered over a bottle of pinot noir as the sky changed colors. Finally, we were ready for dinner.

The yurt has no running water or electricity, but there's no end to its comfort. Heated by a potbelly stove that began its life in Camp Hale, the circular room is warm and cozy. Votive candles grace each table. It's



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easy to forget you're roughing it, though a trek to the outhouse - with scented candles, of course - will remind you soon enough.

The meal includes four courses; dinner and equipment rental is \$55 per person, not including alcohol, tax or tip. Wine runs from \$20 to \$30 a bottle. Even the hungriest of diners ought to leave full. The show officially begins with a plate of appetizers, the result of the chef's whims, shared family style. Diners then have the choice of soup or salad.

Because the staff relies on snowmobiles to get all its food to the restaurant, guests are required to order their entree at least a day in advance. Options include elk tenderloin, oven-roasted chicken, baked salmon, grilled Colorado rack of lamb and vegetarian specials upon request.

My favorite remains the elk, drizzled with a sweet blueberry-port sauce and served with vegetables. The lamb is good too, crusted with a rosemary-pistachio pesto. Dessert is a slice of homemade fruit pie with whipped cream, but I'm usually so full I'm content with hot cocoa with a splash of peppermint schnapps.

The ride down in the pitch black is exhilarating. The snow has firmed up in the cold, and the wind is nippy. We've discovered moonlight is infinitely better than headlamps.

I've learned to crouch as close to the ground as possible, so when I fall I don't have that far to travel. It ought to be noted that skiing in such a manner pretty much guarantees falling often, but leaves no bruises. Other beginners might try my favorite downhill method, which includes placing one ski in the grooved track and leaving the other one out for speed control. You look like a gaper, but it gets the job done. The ultimate goal is to make it back to the Nordic Center intact. And to have a grand time in the process.

The Cookhouse is open for lunch by reservation, and is an a la carte menu. It will be open through the middle of April this season, after which it will close for mud season. It will open again in mid-June or July for the summer season. Call them at (719) 486-8114 for more information.

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