

BY BRIAN IRWIN

# THE GREATEST MOUNTAIN



## EXPLORING MAINE'S STEEP AND SEQUESTERED KATAHDIN

Katahdin, Maine's highest peak at 5,267 feet, is the pride of Baxter State Park and the best ski mountaineering venue on the East Coast. Tucked away in the north-central part of the state, Katahdin—a Penobscot Indian word meaning "The Greatest Mountain"—is a long way from anything (the trailhead is about two hours from Bangor), which is part of the reason it's worth the effort to ski this jagged fin of granite.

Most of the skiing on Katahdin is in the steeper, aesthetic couloirs in one of two glacial cirques on the east side of the mountain. From Roaring Brook Campground, the shortest approach route requires a 15-mile skin into Chimney Pond followed by a 1,425-vertical-foot climb just to get to the base of the gullies. From the basin, it's a 2,300-foot climb up to the peak's spines. Approaches vary from tricky to technical, but crampons and ice axe are recommended. Park rangers will most likely check your gear at Roaring Brook, but also may check at the Chimney Pond bunkhouse at the base of the Great Basin cirque. They will turn you back if you're not prepared.

Although several steep, walled-in couloirs run from the summit of Katahdin into hungry glacial moraines, the Great Basin route down the gut acts as the classic route of Katahdin.

Since Baxter is only open for winter use from December 1 to April 1, make sure you bring your beacon, shovel, probe and the skills to use them. This peak is loaded with avalanche terrain, and there's no forecasting. More extreme slots, like the 2,000-foot Chimney Couloir, make you shake your head wondering if you're in Maine or on Baffin Island. Similar technical descent routes lie in the remote North Basin, which is a few hours from Chimney Pond.



### BACKCOUNTRY BETA

**BASE/SUMMIT ELEVATION:** 1,504/5,267 FEET

**ELEVATION GAIN:** 3,800 FEET

**DIFFICULTY:** A QUALITY MP3 PLAYLIST MAKES THE 15-MILE SKIN A BIT MORE MANAGEABLE, YET A 2,300-FOOT CRAMPON CLIMB WILL BURN YOUR QUADS AND LUNGS. PREPARE TO SPEND THE NIGHT.

**GEARNECK:** ROPES, CRAMPONS, AXE, AVIE GEAR.  
**PUCKER FACTOR:** PUSHING 40 DEGREES, KATAHDIN DEBUNKS THIS WHOLE "STEEP FOR THE EAST" ILLUSION.  
**INFORMATION:** YOU'LL NEED IT, SO CALL OR SCOPE THE WEBSITE.  
207.723.5140; baxterstateparkauthority.com.