

TUCKERMAN RAVINE

Story and photos by Brian Irwin



L arrived at the tiny ski patrol cabin around midnight. My headlamp illuminated old gear and artifacts hanging from rusty nails: an old wood-handled piolet; a photo of the long-since retired avalauncher; a diary; a dusty, wooden ice cream maker. I imagined the old timers, then in their youth, with cable bindings and wool pants, making wide-radius turns. I felt old school. I wanted to be old school.

Tuckerman is old school. Mount Washington has been dubbed the birthplace of American downhill skiing. Through the 1930s Tuckerman hosted Ivy League races, Olympic tryouts and the historic Inferno—a high-speed downhill, dropping 4,000 vertical feet from the summit to Pinkham Notch.

For most, the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center starts the Tuckerman experience. Black and white photos with yellowing borders of men in knickers beside tall, progressive women in long, wool skirts hang in cracked pine frames worn smooth. Pinkham is also a vital information center where skiers and climbers can get the latest weather and avalanche forecasts.

Tucks has the most amazing skiing in the East, hands down. Mount Washington's leeward ravines collect loads of snow, and powder days are not rare. However most days there is a firm windpack that makes for great carving and, unfortunately, a lot of avalanches. Given enough time, Mount Washington's famous hurricane-speed winds destroy lingering surface hoar and pound the snow into a stable slab. But this is Mount Washington, home of the "world's worst weather," so "stable" is relative.

Despite its reputation, Mount Washington backcountry skiing isn't all scary. A few long, wide cruisers (cut years ago by the Civilian Conservation Corps) skirt the mountain's flanks. The most popular is the Sherburne Trail, a two and a half-mile run from Hermit Lake directly to the Pinkham

parking lot that makes getting back to the car at the end of the day a blast.

Alas, easy access creates problems. Tucks is crowded. Don't expect a pure wilderness experience. But if you visit in spring you can expect an entertaining show. On spring Saturdays hundreds of people usually crowd the Lunch Rocks, Tuck's bleacher-seats for the finest in ski accidents and Warren Milleresque humor. Two years ago I saw some guy ride an inflatable pool shark over the headwall and to the bottom, where it exploded after skipping off a mogul. Another tried, unsuccessfully, to ride a rubber raft down *The Dutchess*, one of Tuck's steepest couloirs. The raft gained speed to the point where it slowly lifted off the snow with gentle precision, as if a glider being towed into flight. The rafts' nose gained too much pitch, pointing up with optimistic fervor. The rider slid to the back of the now-airborne raft, bounced his lower back off the back tube and somersaulted with tremendous speed onto his face. The boat gained altitude, flipped three times, floated through space and landed about 50 feet to the side of the couloir in a grove of twisted, stunted pine trees, where it popped and wilted over the tree tops, like a wet sheet on a clothesline.

Imminent avalanche danger. Icefall. Falling skiers. Flying rafts. Arctic winds and bitter cold. So what draws people to Tuckerman? The steep terrain? Accessibility? Partly, but that's not the only

reason. The Tuckerman mystique lies in what you can't see—the atmosphere of the ravine. It's alpine, but it's social. A college reunion from Quebec might crowd you out of a lean-to or six guys wearing matching shirts that say "The Dream Team" might invite you in. It's a magnetic place and although you might have to dive out of the way of a falling skier in a cow costume, you owe it to yourself to ski it. It's where it all began.

Getting There

Approach Tuckerman from the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, halfway between Gorham and Glen, New Hampshire on Route 16.

Food/Lodging

For good food and great beer, try The Moat. The Frontside Grind has the best coffee in town, but skimpy breakfast, so if you want a big pile of pancakes try The Blueberry Muffin.

Camp at Hermit Lake, either in a lean-to or tent site. First come-first served. There is also a climber's hut (The Harvard Mountaineering Cabin) a half-mile north on the forest service's snowcat road toward Huntington Ravine.

Avalanche Info

www.tuckerman.org

