

Golden opportunities for skiers, vacationers at Stratton

By Brian Irwin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

STRATTON MOUNTAIN, Vt. — The boxy gondola at Stratton Mountain Ski Resort is a snug ride. When you shuffle in you'll invariably rub elbows with others. Although the trip up 2,003 feet to the summit is quick, savor it, as the views are stunning and you'll be gliding over some of the best terrain in New England. And those elbows you're nudging just might belong to a future Olympic gold medalist.

Stratton is a legendary race hill. The renowned Stratton Mountain School, or SMS, sits at its base, where a blend of academics and intensive ski instruction have, for three decades, generated a legacy of Olympic and national athletes. Skiers like Caitlin Zelif, 18, a postgraduate skier who is honing her skills before taking them into national competition, spend almost every day training here. The nation's 16th-fastest slalom racer in her class as of the time of this writing, Zelif will be attending the University of Denver this fall, hoping to go big with her sport. She has high aspirations, saying that "the Olympics are on my radar. It's in the back of every racer's mind."

The resort itself caters to this niche. As you ascend the hill you'll see teens popping



HUBERT SCHRIEBL

Resort cofounder Frank Snyder was inspired to create a Tyrolean village at Stratton's base after a trip to Austria.

aerial maneuvers, crushing race gates, and soaring off bus-size features, while coaches critique every move. But this peak isn't just for racers.

Stratton was founded in 1961 by Frank Snyder and Tink Smith. Their vision was to build a true four-season resort where families and ski enthusiasts could come and slide amid the beauty of the Green Mountains. At that time skiing was still emerging in popularity in this country, fueled by inspiration from Austria, the epicenter of downhill skiing. During a trip to Alpach, Austria, Snyder was struck by the region, leading

him to envision the Tyrolean village that would later emerge at Stratton's base.

Stratton has all of the comforts you'd expect from a luxury resort. Heated brick paths wind through a matrix of shops and eateries. You can warm up with a cup of locally roasted coffee and nosh on organic pizza for lunch and sushi for dinner. Fanning out from the base village and the trails, polished accommodations are sprinkled across the slopes. Most house condominiums. Like everything else at Stratton, the appointments are refined. Heated, saltwater outdoor pools and hot tubs and

If you go . . .

Stratton's **condos** are by the far the most convenient option and are quite polished. Some are slopeside, but there's a shuttle for those that are not. One bedroom condos from \$130. You could eat at a different **restaurant** every meal for a week, but the Organic Pizza Restaurant is hard to beat. Pies from \$20. For breakfast, the buffet at the Inn at Stratton Mountain is affordable (\$8) and will fill you up. For **après ski** Grizzly's pub at the base of the gondola is popular and convenient. Or check out the spa for a post-ski massage. From \$75.

a massage at the local spa soothe after a day on the slopes.

But Stratton also has an edge. It was one the first resorts to allow snowboarding, having been opened to the sport by then-local snowboard inventor Jake Burton. The lines here are tortuous and classic, the atmosphere energetic and youthful. Among 600 acres of terrain spread over 94 trails, sparse birch stands link steep, immaculately manicured groomer runs. Broad fields of moguls

drip from the summit cone, while enchanted novice trails like Work Road flank the resort border. An impressive armory of snowguns blankets the hill, ensuring coverage even in dry years.

When night falls the slopes go dark, save for the distant headlights from the fleet of snowcats, grooming the slopes into sheets of corduroy. Stratton's grooming is as impeccable as its other facets, which is fortunate considering some of the racers top 70 miles per hour. Racing isn't limited to hopeful trainees; there's a cadre of adult master skiers who flock to the hill to perpetuate their passion for the sport. Youths like Zelif are inspired by these veterans, some of whom graced the World Cup circuit at their peak.

Off the slopes and after the last chairlift, Stratton's pulse beats to the tune of acoustic singers playing during happy hour. Down the road are a tubing park, dogsledding, and moonlight snowshoe tours. There's even a skateboard park inside the sports complex, now called the WREK.

Although Stratton isn't known for being inexpensive, it hasn't lost touch with its community. Sky Foulkes, the chief

operating officer of Stratton, is also the president of the Stratton Foundation, a not-for-profit that was formed to "enhance opportunities for all working, living, and playing in the mountain community." The foundation works with the local groups to provide charitable contributions ranging from disaster relief to educational programs, from food pantry support to provision of clothes and essentials for those in need.

On a sunny Sunday the porch at Stratton's Mid Mountain Lodge looks like a spandex convention. Scores of skiers in flashy race suits stretch out and assemble shin guards, face masks, and gloves. Beyond, the slalom gates that dot North American, the expert trail used for racing, wave in the wind.

Zelif is on the launch pad, facing the gates she must thread. She taps her boards on the icy brink, takes a deep breath, and pitches forward. Her edges slice the hardpack with a rhythmic scrape as her body oscillates down the fall line, pelting each gate as she slides, one race closer to a possible golden future.

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A winter playground in Ludlow, Vt.

LUDLOW, Vt. — Far more popular during the summer months, when families can stay overnight in affordable cabins along the shores of Echo Lake, Camp Plymouth State Park is worthy of a visit any time of the year. Only a few miles from the homestead of President Coolidge in Plymouth, the former Boy Scout camp offers a bevy of activity in the winter months. When I popped in recently, I saw cross-country skiers gliding over an open field near the lake, snowshoers climbing up the 1-mile (round-trip) Vista Trail, and winter hikers taking their dogs for a stroll. A relatively level trail leads into the piney interior along a rushing stream. At several spots, the brook is iced over. Carefully walk across the



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ice to continue on the trail. On the return trip, take the Vista Trail a short trip up the hillside for great views of Echo Lake. Then scramble down to a small cemetery, where tombstones date to the Civil War era. From here, it's an easy walk to the road and your car.

Heading north on Route

100, turn right onto Plymouth Tyson Road at the Echo Lake Inn intersection. Follow one mile to Boy Scout Camp Road and turn left to reach Camp Plymouth State Park. Park is on the side of the road in winter. www.vtstateparks.com/html/plymouth.htm

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