

Winter retreat for family and Fido alike

By PEGGY NEWLAND
Correspondent

Buster, my ever-fearful Lab, sniffs the air as if searching for anything squirrel. He peers upward at the trees, then out past the granite ledge, and finally, back at me for reassurance.

"No squirrels," I say. And off he runs. Buster is afraid of squirrels. A squirrel fell out of a tree onto him a couple months ago and since this unfortunate encoun-

ter, he feels that the woods are overflowing with leaping, furry animals ready to attack him. We're up in the mountains at the Eagle Mountain House in Jackson - a cure-all for the neurotic dog, with me being the Dog Whisperer. This trail behind Eagle Mountain House, aptly called Eagle Mountain Trail, seems to be squirrel safe. The branches are bare, twitching in the howling wind. Buster's breath puffs white as he skitters up the trail. It appears that all the furry

things are hidden in tree trunks with their supplies of nuts. I pull my neck gator up over my nose and mouth and hope my snowshoes hold on to iced rock. The Eagle Mountain House is a perfect winter retreat for families and Fido. When we arrived two hours earlier, the front desk staff had Buster and I pose in the Victorian-themed lobby for a series of photos for the Dog Gallery. Buster did not cooperate. Turning his head left then right, he eventually decided to smell the rug when they took the last photo. "I guess he's shy," the desk

manager says, laughing. Buster's image is a flash of white fur and black nose. Up ahead, an abandoned shack is grown through with vine and half a fallen pine. The wood is mottled, aged to a dull gray. Branches splay in all directions so Buster and I have to clamber over its trunk. The smell of fresh pine combines with sub-zero wind chills. I wonder if squirrels have made nests anywhere nearby and keep the look-out for filtering tails or any menacing chatter. A hawk



Courtesy photo

DOGS | PAGE D-11 Sled dogs Lance Romance and Morning Star on the job.

ONE-TANK TRIP

Dogs | Eagle Mountain House on National Trust for Historic Preservation

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glides past and lands in an ice-encrusted oak. Buster eyes it warily. "No squirrels," I say. But Buster sits on the trail exactly in front of me. So I quote some Charles Simic, Poet Laureate in 2007. *Unsure of what comes next. Like tragic actors in a theater... With birds circling over our heads, The dark pines strangely still.* These woods calm Buster's neurotic soul and we continue upward.

Built originally in 1879, Eagle Mountain House is listed on the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Cozy, with fireplaces in the lobby and parlors, there are 96 rooms decorated in comfortable mountain getaway decor. Located directly in the heart of Jackson Ski Touring, this is a skiers' wonderland. Jackson Touring, with more than 137 km of trails through woods, maintains trails along Wildcat and Ellis Rivers, over Eagle Mountain Valley and in and around the town of Jackson. You can easily strap on your skis and be gone for hours. Snowshoe trails crisscross the trails and backcountry skiing awaits for experts in White Mountain National Forest nearby. Conservation lands, with Tin Mountain Center as a focal point, border much of Jackson, as well.

Dogs are not allowed on most Jackson Touring Trails. However, they do have about 5 km of dog friendly loops that can be accessed from the Jackson Touring Lodge. Try out Covered Bridge Trail, Gray's Inn Cut-off, Kissing Bridge Trail, and Nestlenook Farm Trail. There is also Bear Brook Cross Country Touring in nearby Bartlett if you want longer routes.

Buster and I just hoof around in the Jackson wilderness. Eagle Mountain's elevation is 1,613 - a mere hill when compared to the surrounding summits of Spruce (2,270), Black (3,304) and North Doublehead (3,053). For an hour, we hike over a series of low granite peaks to the summit. At the top, as we sit on a slab of frozen rock, we spy ant-like skiers gliding over windblown fields as dusk settles in.

More hawks fly overhead and Buster lifts his nose to their flight. I worry for one moment, about to say, "No squirrels," but he barrels down the hill toward something only he can see.

Unfortunately, we see a squirrel on the way down. Buster starts hiking between "Oh, Buster," I say. I've failed at being a Dog Whisperer.

It's time to meet some "real" dogs so we head to Bethel, Maine.



Courtesy photo

Eagle Mountain House in Jackson is a spot suitable for families and the family dog.

Where dogs are tough

They wait in a patient line. Lance Romance, Captain Courageous, Roundy Houndy, Morning Star, Dark Star, Hawk, Cougar and Mr. T Bone all have wagging tails as they strain against harnesses - the only thing keeping them from barreling down the snow covered logging trails near Grafton Notch, Maine. I press my feet hard into the sled brake because Lance Romance smells something fresh in the deep Maine woods and he wants to chase it down. He's the lead dog, the one all the dogs follow, and he looks back at me repetitively with a certain lead dog attitude. The sled slides slightly.

"Hold it tight," New England Dog Sledding's Human Alpha Dog, Steve Crone, reminds me. "Once the dogs get going, they won't stop for anything. Especially if there's something in the woods."

"OK," I say. I don't have a clue how to run a dog sled.

New England Dog Sledding (www.newenglanddogsledging.com) is affiliated with the Bethel Inn, in Bethel, Maine, and offers full dog sledding programs for guests and visitors to the region. Situated in an alcove of white clapboard shops, restaurants and spired churches, Bethel Inn is like coming for a holiday to your

favorite aunt's home. The inn is kicked back elegance, and with some added dog sledding, you can have a wild woods vacation. Even in a low-snow season. Historically, this inn was a place to calm down from "nervous disorders." In 1895, Dr. John Gehring, a surgeon from Cleveland, chose Bethel, Maine, for rest and recuperation after suffering from "physical and mental breakdown" when he was 30. According to the Bethel Historic Society, he created a "self administered regimen which dealt with both mind and body simultaneously" and his treatment combined outdoor activities, such as chopping wood or hiking, with elegant dining and intellectual conversation.

This treatment of medical, mental and physical therapy was successful and Gehring resumed his practice in Bethel, focusing on "nervous disorders similar to his own." In 1913, the Bethel Inn opened as a place to recuperate and recover. A Tiffany bronze plaque, situated just above the lobby fireplace, honors Gehring and his unique approach toward mental health and wellness.

"Hike!" comes the command, and we are off like a shot through the pine trees. Steve guides the team, and he is on constant surveillance of speed, trail and dog. He encourages each dog by name, with lead dogs pacing the group and "wheel dogs" in the back giving brown. Lean and powerful, the symphony of dogs pounding down a winter path, is mesmerizing.

Steve tells me about the importance of "developing a respectful relationship" with the dogs 365 days a year. He believes in "lots of hands on attention" such as petting, grooming, training and conditioning, and it shows with the wagging tails and howling happiness of Steve's team as it races around tight corners and over long expanses of field.

"What about nervous dogs?" I ask.

Steve talks about trust being the key to building enduring relationships with his dogs. One of the younger dogs, who is just over a year, starts to retreat next to one of the "wheels."

Mr. T Bone, Steve immediately pulls the sled over and transfers him up a few paces. Another dog is given "doggie mittens" to help with the ice on his paws. There is much tail wagging during these breaks, and Steve acknowledges each dog as he walks past. Many of the dogs roll in snow so Steve can scratch their bellies.

"These dogs are here all their lives," he tells me. In many dog sledding operations, once dogs get older, they are given away or "farmed." Steve has generous retirement packages for "each and every dog's running career here," and no one is abandoned when they get too weak or can't run any longer.

For three hours, these dogs run and rest, roll in snow and wag their tails. There are occasional races toward scents of snow hare, moose and fox. Steve is an expert in alpine ecology (he has a degree in alpine ecology from Western State College, Gunnison Co.) and points out fresh tracks of

beaver, hare, and fox. "I get to do this every day," Steve says.

Afterward, Steve's crew of canine athletes eat chunks of frozen beef and drink meat water, a chunky concoction of meat, fat and hot water set down steaming in tin bowls. At home, Buster eats Pedigree Weight Management for Adult Dogs and often enjoys cheese and the occasional stray piece of popcorn. T Bone chomps his frozen beef down in one gulp during one break.

I think of nervous conditions and getting out to the woods. The smell of cold air and the scent of something wild and furry running over fresh powder. There's a need to get outside in all of us, and if we take the adventure seriously, we either run with the dogs or become one of the dogs on the couch. It's our choice.

That night, under a pattern of stars, Buster lifts his nose to the moon, and howls. Then he races down the snow shoeing trails, just outside the Bethel Inn. He's onto something in those dark Maine woods, and he's not afraid. At the moment.

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