

Outdoor fun first — cozy charms

► INNS

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Chuck, said as we noisily trekked over the crusty snow. Mother Nature took this as her cue, suddenly unleashing a lovely snowfall that speckled our eyelashes and covered the landscape in a sweep of hushed beauty. We stopped for a moment to take it all in: the falling snow, the lacy ice on the gurgling Bear River, and our partners, buried in layers but looking adorable. Heading back, we debated our plan of action: a dip in the pool or a hot toddy? Sounded like a win-win to us. 150 guest rooms; weekend rates from \$120. Check the web for specials, like a \$99 per person Stay & Dine Getaway. 21 Broad St., 800-654-0125 or 207-824-2175, www.bethelinn.com

Sugar Hill Inn, Sugar Hill, N.H.

It was the food, not the outdoor fun that lured us to this farmhouse in the Franconia region. We had heard great things about Chef Val Fortin's fare, and we weren't disappointed with a single bite of the four-course, prix fixe dinner. "I'm not sure what this is, but it's tasty," said Diane's mate, Paul, as he toppled a tier of puff pastry. And who knew that gingered cauliflower could be so delicious? Other diners obviously agreed; the room was a chorus of "oohs," "ahhs." So far, this inn had won our hearts through our stomachs.

Like most guests, we took advantage of the ski slopes at nearby Cannon Mountain, but one (below-zero) day on the ice-slicked trails was plenty. Where to find a gentler winter activity? Assistant innkeeper Karen Cail suggested the Flume Gorge at Franconia Notch State Park. "It's not officially open in the winter, but a lot of people like to explore it on snowshoes," she said.

This spot is popular with ice climbers, who resemble colorful spiders as they crawl up vast walls of blue ice. On snowshoes, it's a short but dazzling winter walk. This 800-foot-long natural gorge is a fairy land of frozen waterfalls, ice-cloaked river, and granite ledges sprouting thick columns of ice. We took lots of photos of the red-painted Flume Covered Bridge, built in 1886.



SUGAR HILL INN

The Dream Cottage at the Sugar Hill (N.H.) Inn (left). The renovated 1785 Inn in North Conway, N.H., is a former



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After trekking around the gorge for awhile, we figured we had burned off last night's dinner, including the Chocolate Trio. Now if we could just make it home without a stop at Hart's Turkey Farm. Fourteen guest rooms, weekend rates from \$195. 116 New Hampshire Route 117, 800-548-4748 or 603-823-5621, www.sugarhillinn.com

The Porches Inn at Mass MoCA, North Adams

There are numerous inns in the Berkshires, but few are as hip as The Porches. Blessedly without froufrou — a boon to those not partial to cabbage roses and lace — this inn is done up in paint-by-number art and random collectibles, so it's kitschy, not cutesy. But truly, they had us at "outdoor hot tub." There's nothing like slipping into a bubbling tub after dark, under an inky sky, with your significant other. They keep the pool open all winter.

Even if you have visited this colorful assortment of restored Victorian row houses in summertime, you will want to go in winter, when nearby hiking trails are cloaked in snow. If it has been awhile since you have done the kick-and-glide thing on Nordic skis, the 11.2-mile Ashuwillticook Rail Trail is a swell place to

get your bearings. It offers a happy ramble between the towns in the valley between Mount Greylock and the Hoosac Mountains, meandering along the Cheshire Reservoir.

For a more rugged experience, bring a pair of snowshoes suitable for climbing and take on one of the trails at Greylock. Some are used by the snowmobile crowd, but others, like Gould Trail on the east side of the mountain, offer gorgeous glimpses of winter wonderland and total solitude. The Porches Inn is snowshoe-friendly, so the innkeepers can tell you where to go, where to park, and where to get a hearty post-hike dinner. (Nearby Mezza Bar and Bistro is always a good choice.) 47 rooms. Weekend rates, \$180. 231 River St., 413-664-0400, www.porches.com

Mountain View Grand, Whitefield, N.H.

Is this Revival-style property an inn, or a resort? No matter — we had to include it because it offered one of the most bizarre, and totally fun, things we have ever done in the name of outdoor play: bowling with a rubber chicken. That's a sign that this AAA four-diamond-rated inn doesn't take itself too seriously.

And when it comes to recrea-

tion, the place has got game. In just a couple of days, we ice skated until we couldn't feel our feet, went on a nighttime dogsled ride, snow-shoed into the woods, and ate S'mores around a campfire. The clincher: a soak in the tower hot tub, all bubbly water and 360-degree mountain views. "A hot tub soak and S'mores, all in the same day," Paul said. "It doesn't get any better than this!"

Oh, yes it does: The Bruins were playing on the TV in the bar. Isn't it romantic? 144 rooms. Weekend room rates from \$209 (two-night minimum stay required Feb. 17-25 and on weekends). 866-484-3843, www.mountainviewgrand.com

Mountain Top Inn, Chittenden, Vt.

Located about 11 miles from Killington Resort, this wonderful 350-acre property offers 60 kilometers of cross-country skiing and snowshoe trails — more, if you connect with the Catamount Trail. Outdoor options include snowmobile rides, an ice skating rink, a sledding hill, sleigh rides (at \$25 per person, it's inexpensive compared with other places), and Nordic ski and snowshoe rentals and lessons. Knock yourselves out and then collapse under a patchwork quilt

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