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B&B's: A BONDING EXPERIENCE

Get gregarious at the region's tucked-away ski country gems

by Brion O'Connor/

For many, skiing is more of a solitary pursuit. When they're not heading to the backcountry, these folks will suffer through crowded slopes, or — gasp! — sharing chairlifts, in order to get their turns. That's OK. Skiers, like the rest of the planet, come in all sorts of temperaments. Still, I have to admit, I don't share the same approach. For me, skiing has always been a social endeavor. I'm not a fan of 30-minute lift lines, but I certainly like chatting up folks while I'm on the hill. And during lunch in the lodge, or afterward in some après-ski saloon. This hasn't changed with the passing of time, though my "party hearty" days are far, far behind me.

The same goes for where I stay. While the ski condo has become the accommodation of choice, I still prefer a lodge or bed & breakfast setting, where you can share a drink, a meal, and tales of your day on the hill with friends new and old. These are my most vivid ski memories when I was a pint-size shredder. Mom and dad always seemed to find these terrific, tucked-away places — in Vermont, New Hampshire, and even Quebec — that focused more on common space and less on privacy.

It wasn't the actual "skiing" that I recall from those family outings, but the gregarious gatherings in the evening, when all the "grown-ups" would regale one another with tall tales of their slopeside exploits (albeit in a haze of cigarette smoke, which I don't miss). That environment made skiing less of a pastime and more of an event. And those places still exist — you just have to look a little harder to find them. Here are 10 of my favorites, near some of my favorite hills. Some are quiet, and some a bit more raucous. But all of them allow me to reconnect to the skiing of my youth.

Briar Lea B&B and Jolly Drayman Pub

Bethel, Maine (briarleainn.com; 207-824-4717)

Situated a short drive from the mega-resort of Sunday River, the Briar Lea B&B and Jolly Drayman Pub is really the polar opposite of this contemporary ski area. The renovated, 160-year-old farmhouse is a true throw-back, featuring cozy, comfortable rooms that come straight out of central casting for grandma's house. The pub serves up some great brews, and the restaurant offers an eclectic menu including some Indian and British dishes. Need a break from the hill? Simply step out the inn's backdoor and hop onto an extensive trail system for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. There's also a free shuttle from the inn to the seven peaks of Sunday River — a big plus in my book.

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