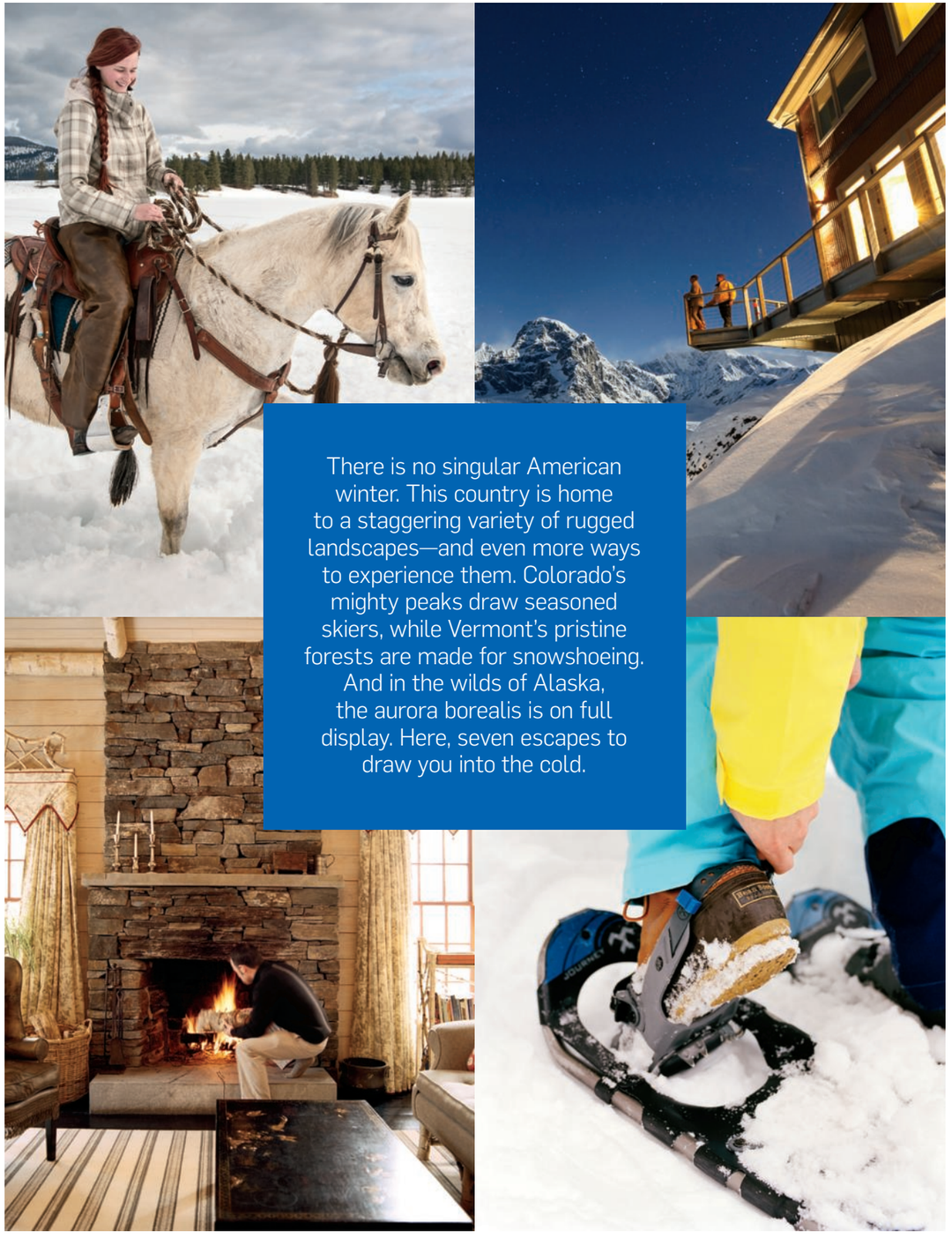
The Great American Winter



There is no singular American winter. This country is home to a staggering variety of rugged landscapes—and even more ways to experience them. Colorado's mighty peaks draw seasoned skiers, while Vermont's pristine forests are made for snowshoeing. And in the wilds of Alaska, the aurora borealis is on full display. Here, seven escapes to draw you into the cold.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FRANK KELLER; MORGAN RACHEL LEVY; ASHLEY CAMPER; JAKE STANGEL

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ALEXIS PIKE; JEFF SCHULTZ/COURTESY OF SHELDON CHALET; ANDREW ROWAT (2)

Clockwise from top left: Alaska's Aurora Winter Train; Uley's Cabin, a restaurant at Crested Butte Mountain Resort, in Colorado; a northern pike ice-fishing catch in Minnesota; soaking in Yellowstone National Park.

Clockwise from top left: Riding at the Resort at Paws Up, a ranch in Montana; Sheldon Chalet, in Denali National Park, Alaska; snowshoeing at Twin Farms, a resort in Vermont; the Treehouse cottage at Twin Farms.

CHRIS BURKARD/COURTESY OF SHELDON CHALET

Wild, Wild Country

In Alaska, the coldest months offer a glimpse of nature at its most elemental—and a chance to spot the aurora borealis. **BY MAGGIE SHIPSTEAD**

LIVING IN LOS ANGELES, I don't crave beaches and palms in winter. Rogue 90-degree days in January make me long to scrape ice off a windshield, or at least wear a sweater. So in March, I flew in to snow-blanketed Anchorage and caught the Alaska Railroad's natty blue-and-yellow Aurora Winter Train to Fairbanks. As we chugged out of the city, the windows filled with trees and snow, an occasional moose, and, around every turn, Denali, getting steadily larger. At 20,310 feet, it's the highest mountain in North America, but that number doesn't express how gigantic it is, how ridiculously far away you can be and still think, *Wow, big.* I'm told the peak is often hidden in clouds, but under blue skies, my experience was of something impossible to miss but constantly pointed out. "There's Denali," said everyone in Anchorage. "There's Denali," said everyone on the train. "There it is, all right," I agreed. It seemed so close—but I was about to get much closer.

It's difficult to convey the awesomeness of the Sheldon Chalet, a new lodge that sits right on Denali's shoulder and is accessible only by helicopter. But the bare facts are these: in the 1950s, a bush pilot named Don Sheldon homesteaded five acres inside what would later become Denali National Park and Preserve, including a 300-foot-high granite outcropping sticking out of a glacier. Atop it, he built a hut that, by virtue of its location, was only practical for use by experienced mountaineers.

Sheldon died in 1975, but last year, two of his children built a hexagonally shaped, heavily engineered, highly improbable five-bedroom piece of heaven, from which guests can trek over glaciers, go heli-hiking, and glimpse the aurora borealis. Flying in, I watched from the helicopter's bubble-like cockpit as leafless birch forest gave way to cracked superhighways of ice snaking through a maze of upthrust slabs, sawtooth ridges, and looming monoliths. "There's Denali," the pilot said.

The chalet appeared ludicrously small, dwarfed by its surroundings, a toy house perched on a miniature rock. After we landed, I was led inside and welcomed with champagne and oysters and other nibbles that refocused my brain on the most important thing—me.

Herein lies the particular, vertigo-inducing magic of the Sheldon Chalet: contrast. The lodge fortifies you with cozy comforts. There's a warm stove, snuggly faux-fur blankets, slippers in your size, even artful little pillow chocolates. But step outside and there is only austerity and silence, a landscape produced by eons of uplifting rock and compressing ice, a place so profoundly unable to know or care about your existence that in its presence you feel both afraid and euphoric. You are so small, and your life is so brief and insignificant, but isn't that kind of freeing? The experience forces you to be in the present, free of petty concerns like Instagramming or sending gloating texts. Plus, there's no Wi-Fi.

The Chalet is only the most rarefied example of an Alaskan trend toward remote, small-scale accommodation. The new Borealis Basecamp, 25 miles north of Fairbanks and fully off-grid, is a lunar colony of dome-shaped white cabins. Each has a panoramic window angled to facilitate viewing the northern lights from—wait for it—bed. Aurora tourism is notoriously tricky; not only do you need to be in the right place at the right time, you need a clear, dark sky. Fairbanks is in the right latitude (check) and has little ambient light and low precipitation (check, check), but you still have to cross your fingers.

My first night, around 10, a pale band appeared in the sky. The wind kicked up; the temperature dropped into the single digits. I got out of bed and hustled into my many layers. I needed to be under the sky, the whole thing.

Pale green light swirled up like peacock plumes. Glittering bridges spanned the horizon. Here it was again—the exhilarating indifference of the natural world. The aurora, this impossibly beautiful thing, holds no intention, carries no purpose, needs no observer. It's chemistry. On this particular night, charged particles had traveled more than 90 million miles through space on the solar wind, and reacted with gases in the atmosphere when I happened to be looking up. Ninety million miles.

"Big country," people say about Alaska, but everything's relative.

Opposite: The Sheldon Chalet, a new luxury lodge in Denali National Park, sits just 10 miles from the mountain's summit.

L.A.-based author Maggie Shipstead is currently working on her third novel, Great Circle.

★ ALASKA TRIP PLANNER

If you want to see both the **Sheldon Chalet** *(sheldonchalet.com; from $2,300 per person per night)* and **Borealis Basecamp** *(borealisbasecamp.com; doubles from $389)* and take the train, it's best to fly in to Fairbanks. The **Aurora Winter Train** *(alaskarailroad.com)* runs December to March, with weekend-only service in fall and spring. Most passengers do the whole trip in one 12-hour, 356-mile shot, but the town of Talkeetna is worth a stop, especially for outdoor activities like mushing or snowmobiling. On Main Street, visit the **Denali Brewing Co.** *(denalibrewing.com)* for microbrews, **Conscious Coffee** *(fb.com/consciouscoffeetalkeetna)* for a shot of caffeine, and the **Roadhouse** *(talkeetnaroadhouse.com)* for colossal cinnamon rolls. The Sheldon Chalet arranges transfers in both Talkeetna and Anchorage, so you can skip Talkeetna or the last leg of the railway, or fly in to Anchorage if you only want to stay at the chalet.

SOAKING IT ALL IN

The hot springs of the American West can be just the cure for the winter blues.

BY AMANDA FORTINI

IT'S BITINGLY cold, and you're in the West, but you don't ski. You can't snowboard, you're too old for sledding, and snowmobiling, loud and rumbly as it is, just isn't your thing. But there is an outdoor activity for those of us who are averse to winter sports: soaking in a thermal hot spring. The only requirement is a willingness to strip down and shiver for a seemingly endless minute before lowering yourself into the hot, lovely water.

I live in Livingston, a town of around 7,000 in southern Montana. In late December or early January, when the sun starts to sink at 4 p.m. and a long, dark evening stretches out before us, my husband and I often drive to one of the many hot springs in our area. We particularly like the low-key Spa Hot Springs Motel & Clinic in the town of White Sulphur Springs, popular for its mineral-rich waters. The three pools—kept at a steady 98, 103, and 105 degrees—are filled with eggy-smelling (but weirdly appealing) sulfurous water that leaves your skin silky with its traces of silica, sulfate, calcium, and magnesium. Along with local ranchers and intrepid travelers, we'll steep ourselves beneath colorful murals depicting Native Americans and wildlife at the water's edge, and maybe sip a beverage we've brought along.

We also like Chico Hot Springs Resort & Day Spa, a more upscale affair outside of Pray, Montana. We might order a prime rib in the restaurant or a poolside burger, and then have a postprandial soak (avid hot-springers use *soak* as a noun) in the natural mineral pools.

On days we're feeling more adventurous, we drive several hours to Idaho's Lava Hot Springs, a five-pool complex where the dark pebbles of the gravel bottom feel slick on your feet. Or Yellowstone National Park's Boiling River, where the scalding waters meet the cold, flowing Gardner River—one of only a few spots where you can legally soak on government land. Here, you can sit, cozily submerged, and spot elk, bison, or bighorn sheep crunching in the snow.

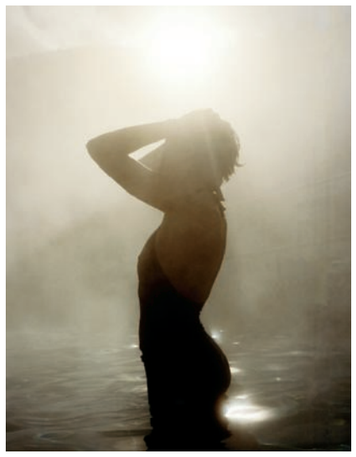
These are the easily accessible pools. But there are also wilder finds all over Montana, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado, and you never know when you'll encounter one (keep a swimsuit in your car). Of course, you can soak in the summer, but it's like drinking hot tea in the shower. The pleasure of a winter soak derives from the elemental contrast of temperatures. Your nose will be frosty, and your hair frozen to a potato-chip crisp, but your relaxed, invigorated body will be toasty, a column of steam rising up around you.

Amanda Fortini writes for the New York Times *and the* California Sunday Magazine.

★

WESTERN U.S. TRIP PLANNER

Spa Hot Springs Motel & Clinic *(spahotsprings.com)*, in central Montana, has three pools open year-round. A hundred miles south, near the Wyoming border, there's **Chico Hot Springs Resort & Day Spa** *(chicohotsprings.com)*, which has been welcoming bathers since 1900. **Lava Hot Springs** *(lavahotsprings.com)* in Idaho has a network of outdoor mineral-water pools. While many springs in Yellowstone are off-limits, thermal waters can be enjoyed at the park's **Boiling River** *(nps.gov/yellowstone)*.



From left: The Boiling River at Yellowstone National Park; bathing at Chico Hot Springs Resort & Day Spa, near Pray, Montana; a pool at Spa Hot Springs Motel & Clinic, in White Sulphur Springs, Montana.

FROM LEFT: JAKE STANGEL (2); ALEXIS PIKE

ASHLEY CAMPER

In Minnesota, where the lakes are full of pike, trout, walleye, and bass, fishing is a year-round sport.

On Frozen Pond

In Minnesota lake territory, ice fishing can be many things: a convivial tradition, a centuries-old sport, and, if you're lucky, the beginning of a beautiful meal.

BY PETER KAMINSKY

I HAVE FISHED with the Tsimané in the Amazon with a bow and arrow. I have cast my line just 700 miles from Antarctica in the teeth of Force 5 gales. I have accidentally bounced a fly off an ancient statue at Udaipur's Lake Palace. But ice fishing? Sitting around on a frozen lake always seemed like nothing more than an excuse to drink beer while staring at a hole. It had never really appealed to my angling instincts.

Until now. On a recent trip to Minnesota, I explored the frozen waterways around Lake Minnetonka, just west of the Twin Cities—where I discovered there is actually an active, exciting side to ice fishing, one that involves not rods and reels but spears. Ice spearfishing is a tradition first practiced in the Midwest by the indigenous Ojibwa, who have fished here for millennia. Tenting themselves under thick blankets, they would hack a large hole in the ice and lie in wait for northern pike, trout, walleye, or bass. Today, you can still see anglers spearfishing on many of Minnesota's more than 10,000 frozen lakes, sheltered from the cold in the shantytowns of ice huts that have replaced the traditional Ojibwa mats.

There was another draw in the area, I must admit. Gavin Kaysen, a local chef whose food I had eaten in New York, recently opened Bellecour, a French bistro and bakery in the town of Wayzata—once a bucolic Lake Minnetonka getaway for well-heeled Minneapolitans, now a fashionable suburb of the Twin Cities. Here, he enjoys a well-deserved reputation for reverent updates of French seafood classics, from hearty bouillabaisse to a refined Minnesota trout Véronique with champagne beurre blanc.

"You catch them and I'll cook them," Kaysen told me. "*After* I take my kids ice-skating." Typical. Here, locals don't see winter as an excuse to hibernate and get all *hygge* by the fireplace. Whether they are ice-skating or ice boating, cross-country skiing or snowshoeing, Minnesotans consider getting outdoors when the temperature nosedives to be a civic virtue.

The next morning, I rendezvoused with Luke Swanson, a boundlessly enthusiastic fishing guide from the local outfitter Livin' the Dream, at a smaller lake not far from Lake Minnetonka (one that I've promised him I will not name). We drove across the icebound surface to one of the shacks that he rents out to fishers each winter: a low-ceilinged hut that looks like a toolshed has lost its way and wandered onto the ice. Inside, a foldout bench, some fishing tackle, a set of spears (each reminiscent of a weaponized hay rake), and—bless Luke's soul!—a space heater.

And then the magical part: Swanson had sawed a rectangle in the middle of the ice floor. It was like a picture window opening onto a dream-haunted realm. The shack was kept dark so that meandering fish could not see us, but the underwater scene was illuminated by the even, white light of the sun shining on the lake through two feet of ice. Scattered clamshells and tree branches were clearly visible along the pale lake bottom, through 10 feet of gin-clear water.

★

MINNESOTA TRIP PLANNER

Rent a car for the 30-minute drive to Wayzata from the Minneapolis–St. Paul airport; it will be useful for lake-hopping. One of the town's more recent lakeside attractions is the 92-room **Hotel Landing** *(thehotellanding.com; doubles from $199)*, its first new hotel in 50 years. Comfy Scandinavian-inflected suites make it a perfect home base after a day outdoors. At **Bellecour** *(bellecourrestaurant.com; entrées $25–$33)*, chef Gavin Kaysen's menu rotates through hall-of-fame French seafood dishes like *moules frites* and a classic *fruits de mer*. There is no shortage of ice-fishing guide services, but I opted for the expertise of Luke Swanson at **Livin' the Dream** *(livinthedreamguideservice.com; from $85, including equipment rental)*. You'll need a valid Minnesota fishing license *(dnr.state.mn.us; from $14)* as well as one for "dark house spearing" *($17)* if you want to try your hand at spearfishing.

Swanson took a live sucker, a bottom-feeding baitfish, and secured it with a metal clip tethered to an eight-foot line. He hoped that it would catch the attention of a pike: a fearsome-looking predator with a face straight out of a Jurassic nightmare. As a further come-on, he dipped in a second line holding a fish-shaped decoy with bright red fins.

And there we sat, swimming the wooden decoy in lazy circles and occasionally pulling the live bait back into the center of the window. Nothing moved below us save our offerings. I was growing sleepy...*very* sleepy.

Then, a yell from Swanson. "There's a big one coming!" I awoke to the sight of a *huge* pike fastened onto our sucker. In one motion, Swanson picked up his spear and pierced the fish. He lifted it from the water—an impressive 38-incher. "I'll keep this guy for myself," he said. "Great fish, but the smaller ones make better eating." We didn't catch anything else that day, but an angler in a neighboring hut generously obliged us with a smaller pike that we took, hungrily, to Kaysen's home.

The first thing anyone will tell you about pike: they are extremely bony. It's a drag to tweeze out each slender splinter. But Kaysen has the knife skills of a master, perfected during his years working under Daniel Boulud. He deftly skinned the fillets and called for his young sons. "Feel how fresh this is," he said. "The muscle still moves when you touch it." And, yes, when I pressed on the fillet I could feel the slightest tremor in the flesh.

Kaysen cooked the pike simply, with only melted butter, lemon, garlic, and a bay leaf. After just a few minutes, it was ready, garnished with deep green chervil alongside a winter salad of shaved fennel, wafer-thin slices of celery, and radishes dressed with garlic-laced yogurt and dill.

We gathered around the counter, forks at the ready. In the afternoon light of the bright, uncluttered kitchen, I was struck by the green of the herbs, the white flesh of the pike. Outside, the snow-covered backyard and the fir trees that ringed it were in harmony with our kitchen tableau. The warm, buttery fish, snatched from winter's grip on a frozen lake, was a plateful of proof that the outdoor lifestyle in icy Minnesota has its own delicious rewards.

Peter Kaminsky is a Brooklyn-based author who writes about fishing and food.

COLD MOUNTAIN

In the tiny Colorado towns of Crested Butte and Irwin, home to adventure-focused hotel group Eleven Experience, you can enjoy the quintessential American ski getaway in the height of comfort. **BY TOM VANDERBILT**

★ **COLORADO TRIP PLANNER**

From Denver International Airport, rent a sturdy car for the five-hour drive to Crested Butte. Or fly on from Denver to Montrose (a two-hour drive away) or Gunnison (just 40 minutes). **Eleven Experience** *(elevenexperience.com)* has three properties in town. The new **Lofts at Public House** *(doubles from $350)* are on Elk Avenue, Crested Butte's main street, with a lovely pub and underground taproom open to the public. Multigenerational groups should consider **Scarp Ridge Lodge** *(from $15,700, all-inclusive)*, available for buyout only, which has six rooms and a saltwater pool. The four-bedroom **Sopris House** *(from $9,600, all-inclusive)*, also buyout-only, has a private saloon and a copper hot tub.

AS WE SAT before a crackling noonday fire in the Cat Barn—a rustic, après-ski cabin owned by Eleven Experience, in Irwin, Colorado—Alan Bernholtz waxed mystical on the pleasures of winter: the stillness, the fresh powder. "When you feel that resistance of snow, and it's quiet, it's just an indescribable experience that you want to have again," he said.

I wasn't sure I fully understood what he was talking about, but like an acolyte who had traveled far for a guru, I nodded enthusiastically. Bernholtz is the "minister of fun" for Eleven, an international luxury hotel group that has three properties—Scarp Ridge Lodge, Sopris House, and Public House—in Crested Butte, the self-proclaimed "last great ski town in Colorado." Though Crested Butte, which is located 120 miles southwest of Denver, does have fantastic runs, Eleven chooses to base its skiing operations in Irwin, a once-thriving, now mostly empty mining town 10 miles away. Irwin racks up 300 inches of snowfall in a year—almost twice as much as Crested Butte.

After Bernholtz, a longtime mountain guide, had hauled me and a handful of other guests up to Irwin in a rubber-tracked 10-passenger snowcat, we set out to explore the wilderness: some on foot, others on skis. It wasn't hard to discern the magic of Irwin on a clear February morning. Instead of crowded lift lines and slopeside bars, there was a preternatural stillness and untracked snow as far as the eye could see. I strapped on snowshoes for a recon of the area, walking past Eleven's Movie Cabin, originally used as the house in *The Further Adventures of the Wilderness Family* (1978) and *Mountain Family Robinson* (1979), two films that follow the escapades of an exasperated city family that has moved to the woods. (I could relate.) Like the Cat Barn, so named for its resident snowcats, Eleven often uses this intimate cabin as a casual hangout for guests.

Indeed, Eleven is all about creating bespoke, luxurious adventures in the wilderness. Founded by Chad Pike, a senior managing director at the Blackstone Group, the company takes its name

Opposite: Scarp Ridge Lodge, a six-room inn in downtown Crested Butte, dates back to the 19th century, when it was a dance hall frequented by miners.

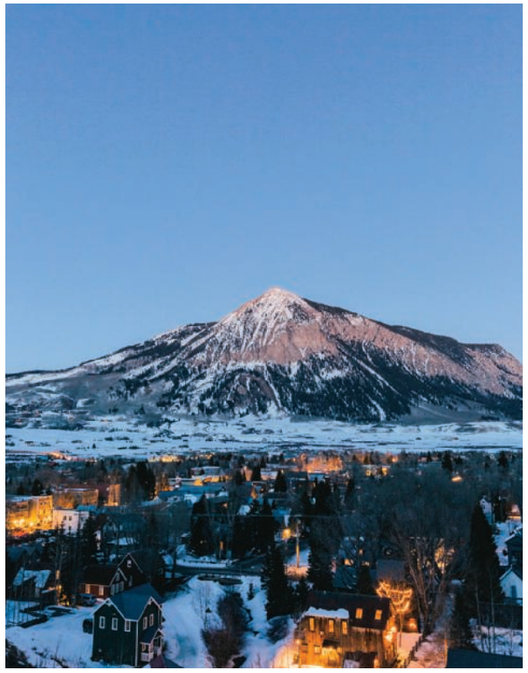
MORGAN RACHEL LEVY

from the infamous Marshall amplifier from *This Is Spinal Tap,* the one with the extra digit of loudness. The base of operations is in Crested Butte, where Eleven opened Scarp Ridge Lodge, the flagship, in 2011. Typically booked on an exclusive-use basis, it sits on a side street in the circa-1885 Croatian Hall, its interior now updated with ski lockers in the foyer and a rooftop hot tub offering a perfect view of Mount Emmons. The four-room Sopris House followed in 2013, and in 2017, Eleven added the Public House, a restored 19th-century building on Elk Avenue. It has a pub on the ground floor, and three loft-style lodgings above, which guests can book individually.

Crested Butte lacks the social-register buzz of towns like Aspen and Vail, so it may seem an odd home base considering Eleven's rarefied clientele. While there has been a quiet influx of money—typically second-home owners from Texas and Oklahoma—Crested Butte, like Telluride, is often regarded as the sort of place other places used to be. When people aren't skiing or mountain biking, they are participating in quirky events like the Chainless World Championships, in which participants ride a bike without a chain seven miles downhill.

But after spending some time at Eleven, the choice of Crested Butte began to make sense to me. Locals like Bernholtz really do think of nothing but the outdoors; some restaurants will even halt their lunch service because everyone is up on the mountain. And with those mountains, who could blame them?

Tom Vanderbilt, a frequent contributor to Travel + Leisure, *is based in New York City.*



Crested Butte mountain, which forms the backdrop of its namesake Colorado ski town, is part of the Elk mountain range.

Snowed In

At Twin Farms, a historic resort in Vermont, **FLORA STUBBS** discovers warm fireplaces, hearty meals, and the pleasures of doing nothing.

THERE WAS SNOW in the trees as we crossed the Vermont state border—evidence, according to my ski aficionado husband, David, that a good-size winter storm had just blown through. Sure enough, when we pulled through the gates of Twin Farms, a storied resort near the town of Barnard, we found it swaddled in a fairy-tale blanket of fresh, foot-deep snow.

I'd never really seen the American winter from anywhere but the gritty sidewalks of New York City, where David and I live. When I was growing up on the southern coast of England, winters were mild, and snow, when it came, fell in inches, not feet. So as our host, a genial, bearded man named Kyle Rikert, showed us around Twin Farms, I felt as if I was experiencing the season fully for the first time.

Blue-tinged drifts framed each of the windows of the hotel's main building—an 18th-century farmhouse, which the novelist Sinclair Lewis bought in 1928 as a gift for his then-fiancé, a journalist named Dorothy Thompson. Snow lay on its rooftop in thick swags. A nearby covered bridge was fringed with icicles the size of parsnips. Somewhere in the distance, geese flew over a frozen lake.

"You got lucky!" said recreation manager Brenda Hillier, picking skis off a rack in the resort's wooden ski hut that afternoon. "This is only about the tenth day of skiing we've had this year." We were at the foot of Sonnenberg, where Twin Farms acquired six downhill-ski trails back when the property became a hotel in the 1990s. Vermont has seen massive fluctuations in snowfall over the past two decades; today, Twin Farms doesn't really publicize its private slopes, since they're usable so rarely.

"In the seventies and eighties, the whole neighborhood used to learn here," Hillier said. "It cost six dollars a day." As a child, David had also learned to ski in the area, at Suicide Six—a small but much-loved mountain just outside of Woodstock. It had been 25 years since he last took to the slopes, but he seemed unruffled as he headed up Sonnenberg mountain on the back of a snowcat in jeans and a pair of woolly gloves.

I, on the other hand, had never skied before,

MORGAN RACHEL LEVY

From left: Twin Farms, a luxury resort in Vermont, is famous for its pancakes; guests go cross-country skiing, then retreat to the Pub for drinks.

FROM LEFT: KIRA TURNBULL; ANDREW ROWAT (2)

and was still outside the hut rehearsing the "pizza pie and french fries" drill commonly used to teach children when David reappeared, zigzagging down the sheer face of the empty mountain like something from a James Bond movie. Staffers gathered around to admire his flawless tracks as I slid quietly backward down a tiny incline, vowing to get our kids—who we'd left with their grandparents in New York—into intensive ski training before the winter was over.

All this to say, I never got to fully utilize the ski-in, ski-out feature of our accommodation, the Chalet, which sits to the side of Sonnenberg mountain. It didn't really matter. Each of the 20 rooms and cottages at Twin Farms is unique. Ours, an airy, two-story wooden cottage, had views all the way to Pico Mountain, some 15 miles away. Looking out at the chocolate-box scenery from under a furry blanket, blissfully alone, was far more enjoyable than skiing, anyway.

For most of the year, Twin Farms has a no-children policy. As any parent will tell you, life with young kids is a perfectionist's nightmare; Twin Farms is one of those rare hotels that allows its guests to pretend, for a short while, that the world around them is flawless. Care to select from 27 regional cheeses and have them delivered with a bottle of wine to your chalet before dinner? Not a problem. A massage in front of a wood fire, followed by a soak in your own private hot tub? A phone call away.

And then there was the food. From the moment our server arrived to tell us about the particular type of salt we would have on our table at dinner that evening, it was clear we were in for a memorable meal. Sure enough, the seven-course tasting menu with wine pairings (all of which was included in our room rate) was the perfect balance of hearty and high-concept, from the cheddar fritter and aioli starter to the entrée of local suckling pig with smoked-potato purée and crispy brussels sprouts. Pleasantly stuffed, we declined the offer of a ride to our chalet and tramped back in the icy darkness, just as the first few flakes of a fresh snowfall began spiraling down from the sky.

The next morning we went snowshoeing: a gratifyingly even playing field for David and me and, in my opinion, the best way to explore the 300 idyllic acres surrounding the farm. Once we'd gotten the hang of the snowshoes—and it didn't take long—the crunch-crunch of feet sinking into velvety, virgin drifts became almost meditative. Blue jays and woodpeckers hopped between snow-covered birch branches; the metal spigots used to collect syrup from the maple trees wore little white hats. The only sound was the wind in the woods and the tinkle of meltwater running somewhere beneath the diamond-dust drifts that framed our path.

I was reminded of Sinclair Lewis's wife Dorothy's words about Twin Farms. Among other pastoral delights, she wrote, the couple wanted a Vermont estate that could provide them with "delicious air." In these woods each breath did feel delicious, like a drink of clear, cold water. We gulped it down. The whole experience was a celebration of the elements, rather than the constant battle against them that life in the urban Northeast so often resembles. Which is to say, it was precisely what I'd always hoped the American winter would be.

Flora Stubbs is the features director of Travel + Leisure *and* Departures.

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VERMONT TRIP PLANNER

Twin Farms *(twinfarms.com; doubles from $1,600, all-inclusive)* is a 2½-hour drive from Boston, or five hours from New York. You can also fly in to the small airport in Burlington, Vermont, which is just over an hour from the property. Rates include optional picnic lunches and a cocktail hour each night.

ALONG FOR THE RIDE

At the Resort at Paws Up, a sprawling ranch in western Montana, **JESSE ASHLOCK** tries his hand at the little-known Nordic sport of skijoring—and does his best to hang on.

ON A BLUEBIRD Montana morning in February, I found myself in a vast, snow-covered field, clipped into a pair of downhill skis and holding on to a towrope attached to the saddle of a handsome bay horse named Buckshot. The place was the Resort at Paws Up, a 37,000-acre luxury retreat and working cattle ranch in the Blackfoot Valley, east of Missoula. It's a wonderful place to stay, with spacious, haute-rustic cabins that feel like private homes, shaded by ponderosa pines. But as comfortable as the accommodations are, you don't really want to linger in them too long, because there are just so many fun things to do in this beautiful corner of the country.

In midwinter, said fun things include dog-sledding through the woods and snowmobiling up to Garnet, a perfectly preserved 1860s mining town—both of which I tried—as well as cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and downhill tubing. But I had come specifically to experience the peculiar thrills of equine skiing, better known as skijoring. This unusual pastime has been popular in the western United States since the early 20th century, when Scandinavian immigrants imported it from Lapland, where it has been practiced for centuries using reindeer or dogs (*skikjøring* means "ski driving" in Norwegian). The version practiced with a horse and rider can also be a competitive sport: there have been several campaigns to include it in the Winter Olympics, and each January, at the Ski Joring Invitational in Whitefish, Montana, top skijorers compete on a course with jumps, gates, and jousting rings they have to capture as they go.

Jackie Kecskes, Paws Up's equestrian manager, assured me that if I could ski, I could skijor. She sat astride Buckshot, wearing a wide-rimmed felt hat, a Barbour jacket, and jeans. "We had one guest struggle," she said, "but everyone else has been able to do it, from a 69-year-old man to a teenager with a GoPro taking selfies." After asking if I was ready, she murmured to Buckshot, who took off in a gentle trot along a path in the snow about the size of a high-school track. All I had to do was rock back slightly on my skis in a kind of half-squat while feeding the rope back and forth to modulate my distance from the horse. A full circuit took less than a minute. Kecskes was right: skijoring was easy enough, though the position took a bit of getting used to. Part of what felt strange was that I didn't feel like I was really *doing* anything—other than hanging on, which I didn't do so well when Buckshot sped to a gallop, slingshotting me around a curve.

After a few loops I tried slaloming in and out of the colored markers on the course, quickly realizing how important the edges of my skis were for navigating the turns. Eventually, my forearms and some mysterious small muscles in my sides—obliques?—started to bark. "Everyone feels it in a different part of their body," Kecskes told me. I took a breather while she swapped Buckshot for his lighter-colored buddy, Doc. Once we started up again, I just focused on holding the rope and appreciating the sensation of gliding behind this powerful animal, the wind on my cheeks, the sturdy snowcapped mountains on the horizon.

After lunch, Kecskes and I went trail riding. She gave me a white draft horse named Traveller, named after the one owned by Robert E. Lee, and we ambled through the snow along the banks of the Blackfoot River, chatting about her horses' cliquishness. "It's like in high school," she said. "They're like, '*You* can't sit here for lunch, *you* can't say hi to my friend.'" We passed under Lookout Rock, where Lewis and Clark are said to have stopped to decide which way to go next. A storm was coming in from the west, a dark, sculptural cloud formation massing against the blue sky. I felt an acute, ringing happiness at the majesty of this American landscape, and the pleasure of getting to know the beautiful animal whose reins I held. I knew that when I got home I'd tell everyone that in Montana I'd spent a highly entertaining hour getting pulled around on skis by a horse. But then I'd add that there's nothing in the world better than riding one.

Jesse Ashlock is the executive editor of Travel + Leisure.

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MONTANA TRIP PLANNER

Travelers can reach the **Resort at Paws Up** *(pawsup.com; doubles from $650 per person, all-inclusive)* by flying into Missoula, Montana. Complimentary round-trip transportation is included in the rate. One-hour skijoring sessions are $200.

Above: A guest cabin at the Resort at Paws Up, a luxury ranch in western Montana. *Opposite:* Skijoring on the Paws Up grounds.

ALEXIS PIKE (2)