

Sunday River, Maine

'The Rivah' is back – with new owners, big plans and a classically quaint town just down the road.

by Hilary Nangle, Ski Magazine March/April 2008

Not that it ever disappeared from skier's minds, but years of benign neglect did take their toll on western Maine's Sunday River. One of the state's largest ski areas, Sunday River has long suffered from a lack of capital. Which explains why locals are thrilled by new owner Boyne USA's renewed dedication to snowmaking and grooming, the promise of new lifts and hints of expansion.

Not that Sunday River is small. It sprawls over eight interconnected peaks, spanning three-plus miles from White Cap to Jordan Bowl. Bookended by two hotels, the resort encompasses three base areas, hundreds of condos, restaurants, a market and a ski shop. Looking for soul? What Sunday River lacks you'll find six miles distant in Bethel, a tapestry of Vermont quaint and New Hampshire charm woven together with Maine independence.

Radiating from Bethel's town green are white-clapboard homes and inns, steepled churches, and a main street jammed with restaurants ranging from vegan to Korean. Shops sell everything from hardware to pottery, work clothes to Irish imports. And bridging the miles-and centuries- between Victorian Bethel and modern Sunday River is a free shuttle bus, making coming and going pleasantly simple. Which is just what you want for a weekend destination.

DAY ONE

It's a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Boston to Sunday River. Plan to arrive in time to explore Bethel. Don't miss Bonnema Potter's glazed porcelain (207-824-2821) and Linda Clifford Scottish & Irish Merchant, where the selection of all things Celtic has enticed even Internet shoppers from Ireland (207-824-6560). Stop in Maine Line Products for a genuine duct-tape wallet – a Maine souvenir of the finest sort (207-875-2522).

If you prefer the quietude of Bethel, book a room at The Bethel Inn, a country inn on the village green (from \$120 per night; bethelinn.com; 800-654-0125). But to maximize your slopetime, you'll want to stay in the base village. The 230 room Grand Summit is closest to the action (from \$99 per person, per night; sundayriver.com; 800-543-2754).

After checking in, catch a late après-ski with Denny Breu, playing at Phoenix House and Well until 8 p.m. every weekend (phoenixhouseandwell.com; 207-824-2222) or sip margaritas and savor Mexican-inspired fare at Gringo Harry's Mexican Steakhouse (207-824-4000). Try the adobo duck or the cocoa-rubbed sirloin. Not ready to turn in? The Matterhorn Ski Bar, on the access road, has live music on Fridays (matterhornskibar.com; 2-7-824-6836). Check out the ski artifacts displayed throughout the barn, and look for Glen Plake's autograph on the ceiling.

DAY TWO

Begin with the buffet at Legends, in the Grand Summit, then head to the White Cap Quad for its 8 a.m. opening. (Being an early riser pays off on the crowded Locke/Barker and South Ridge areas.)

Resist the urge to move horizontally across the peaks. Instead, maximize vertical by concentrating on one area at a time. Wake up on Ecstasy/Cascades, a wide-bodied blue that straddles Locke/Barker's terrain. Do laps on Barker's Sunday River Express before the masses arrive, then hit the Locke triple for a few runs before cutting over to the Spruce Peak triple.

In the mood for some great blues? Both American Express and Risky Business are cruising favorites. Ratchet up the challenge on Downdraft, staying skier's left for the best snow. By 10 a.m., the crowds are surging, so break for a cocoa at the North Peak Lodge before dropping down to the relatively quiet Aurora Peak base. Most folks simply pass through Aurora on their cross-mountain quest, but Northern Lights and Airglow provide good vert, while double-blacks Celestial Glade and Black Hole challenge experts.

When lunch calls, return to North Peak and dabble in the bumps on split groomed 3D, then gently slalom through the beginners to the South Ridge base, heading for a bowl of lobster stew at The Well. Although only a few minutes' walk from the slopes, the restaurant, in one-time Sunday River owner Les Otten's former home, is lunchtime secret.

After, ski or shuttle to White Cap, site of the much-ballyhooed White Heat expert trail. Long, wide and steep, it's cut straight down the fall line, and it's often a mogul minefield. Ride the chair above it to watch the showboat (or merely survival) antics below. If you're not up for the challenge, the adjacent Salvation run deliver on its name. Cool down with a few easy turns off the Little White Cap quad before calling it a day.

Soak in the hotel pool or hot tubs, or enjoy a massage at the spa, but wrap it up in time to head out to Bethel. Order a pint at The Jolly Drayman Pub & Restaurant, located at the Briar Lea (jollydraymanpub.com; 207-824-4717), before switching continents for dinner at Cho Sun, which serves Japanese and Korean fare amidst Asian art and antiques (chosunrestaurant.com; 207-824-7370). After dinner, head downstairs to the Suds Pub, a local hangout, or back to the village for an Export Ale at the Shipyard Brew Haus or Pugsley's Pub.

DAY THREE

Shuttle to the Jordan Grand, at the edge of the resort, for breakfast at Grand Avenue (sundayriver.com; 207-824-5000), followed by first tracks on the blue highways that swoop and roll down Jordan Bowl's 1,500-foot vertical. Summit views include glimpses of the resort's 6,000 acres of developable land. Test your mettle on neighboring Oz, an experts-only hub of ungroomed steeps, bumps and trees. Kansas provides an escape hatch to the Aurora base, from which you can work your way back to White Cap, revisiting your favorites before ending with lunch at the Shipyard. As you rehash the weekend and ponder future growth (possibilities include a Chondola to North Peak and nightskiing), it's clear: The Rivah's back. And you will be, too.