



Fresh Tracks, Furry Fun, and Frozen Lakes

Wild Winter Sports of Central Montana

by Matt Kettmann

Ahh, the curative qualities of Moose Drool. I'd nearly forgotten the deep brown ale's ability to calm its drinker until last month, when I excitedly downed three pints of the stuff over a cheeseburger and onion rings on the first night of an extended weekend in Montana. With stuffed bison heads overlooking my wooden table, the ring of slot machines echoing over my shoulder, and a neighboring booth's conversation ranging from ranching to snowfall to the "liberal" media, I knew I was back in the state that captivated me a year ago, both for its stunning natural beauty and its people's fierce independence.

Last winter, my cousin and I covered northwest Montana, riding the powder-filled downhill of Snowbowl outside Missoula, the empty trails of Blacktail above Flathead Lake, and the frigid vastness of Big Mountain, the aptly named mega-resort that rises sharply above the bar-laden town of Whitefish. This year, however, the state's tourism department was to escort me—with another writer or two in tow—around the south central parts of the state. It was my official introduction to "travel journalism," a contradictory world where pro writers get the special treatment on "fam (short for familiarization) trips" in return for, hopefully and usually, a nice write-up.

I figured it would be an interesting experience and an opportunity to network, not to mention a kick-ass way to spend a few days away from the hustle of Santa Barbara. I promised to reserve my objectivity—but with plans to snowboard the nation's newest resort, dog sled through the wilderness, try out the new sport of snowkiting at the first annual Montana Snowkite Rodeo, and check out the most happenin' joints from Bozeman to Butte, I was also fairly certain that having a bad time would be impossible.

THE DAWN OF MOONLIGHT

After being awakened by the blaring sunshine-off-snow light that crept through my window shades at the **Big Sky Comfort Inn** on my first Montana morning, I hit up the continental breakfast, checked out, and then stepped into the brisk, lower-than-10-degree cold, which sent sharp pangs into my California lungs. With the heat cranking in my rental SUV—and my foggy windshield eventually defrosting—I headed toward **Lone Mountain**, the Matterhorn-like peak that juts skyward out to form the famous face of Big Sky Montana. The guy who checked me into the inn had said that the Big Sky resort was the place to go, with steep ski slopes, scary terrain, and an endless amount of runs. But his advice only made my first-day-of-the-season-snowboard-legs all the more confident in choosing **Moonlight Basin**, Big Sky's more tranquil little sister.

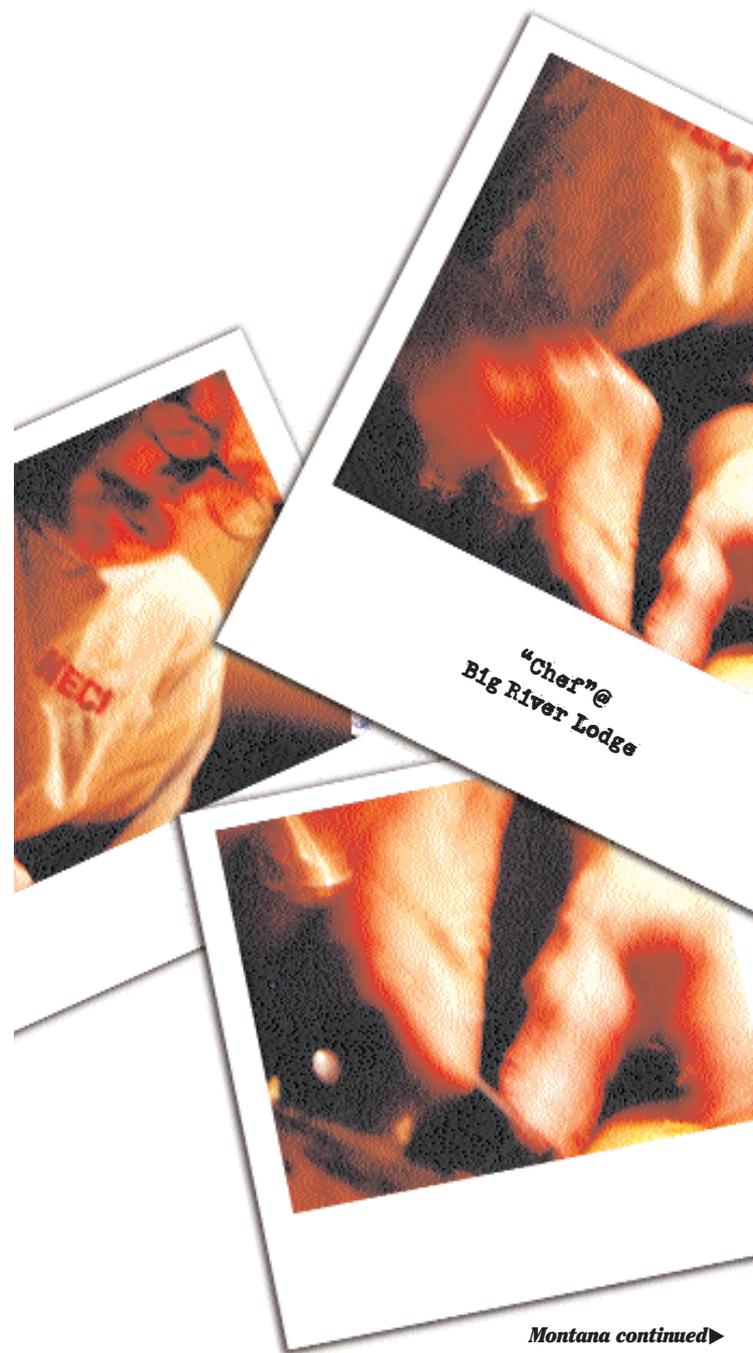
Located on the backside of Lone Mountain, Moonlight Basin is North America's newest ski resort, opening for business just last December. Once in the cozy, polished wood lodge, I met my host for the day, a mild-mannered dude

named Andrew. A transplant from Milwaukee, Andrew started working at Moonlight because, he said, "There's no bro scene here," hinting that there was a show-offish attitude next door at Big Sky.

Within minutes—as always, no lift lines in Montana—my legs were getting warm on the most entertaining beginner slope I've ever boarded. The big lift was next, and on the ride up Andrew pointed out the backwoods—accessible only by Snowcat—and the places where more lifts will likely be put in the future. But looming above it all was the face of Moonlight, an impressive series of rocky 40-foot cliffs and skinny chutes, all bolstered by a fear-mongering slant, and protected from overuse and inexperienced mountain men by the lack of lifts. A rarity in California—where lifts crisscross most resorts—Moonlight's face is only accessible by a long uphill hike in the lung-punishing altitude. At one point I stood underneath its shadow next to one of the best Telemark skiers alive, who said, "That's the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life."

So we rode downhill instead of walking up, finding roller coaster-like gullies through lodge-pole pines, long patches of powder on the fringes of the groomed paths, and, thanks to Andrew, the resort's most hidden nooks and crannies. With warmed-up legs, we did a mini-hike toward the face, which at that point had ski patrolmen on it clearing precarious zones and making otherwise dangerous places passable. They looked like tiny ants on a steep hill of powdered sugar. Chills of what-if fright echoed through my body. Fifteen minutes later, we took off into a run of untouched, thigh-deep powder. Meeting up with another hospitality volunteer—there appeared to be more of these purple-and-yellow-jacketed folks than actual customers that day—we hiked again, this time setting off beneath the avalanche gun. Then it was a well-deserved lunchtime after three hours of riding.

Over kielbasa and a Heineken, I met Rich, an L.A. native who now runs marketing for Moonlight and loves recounting



Montana continued ▶

its history. Moonlight is owned by a duo from nearby Ennis, who bought the property out of a love for their backyard and developed the resort with the principles of saving open space, treading lightly, and keeping service a priority. And since ski resort development on private land is pretty much unchecked in Montana, it's clear the pair didn't do it because they had to. They did it because they believed it was right. "It's really fun to work for a place you believe in," said Rich, who then took me on some of his favorite runs.

FLOW ON, BIG RIVER

The brief drive from the Big Sky highway to Squaw Creek Road through Gallatin Canyon is impressive: huge stone walls channel a fast-running river through a densely wooded landscape. Little did I know that one of the most prominent rock faces would be the backdrop of my next stop, the **Big River Lodge**, a collection of cabins just steps from the Gallatin River, where room price includes two truly gourmet meals a day and all beverages. As I parked, a man who introduced himself as Chef welcomed me into the main lodge, where I met Debra, an L.A. native who has owned the place for about five years with her husband, a UCSB grad.

After getting the tour of my cabin—a bedroom, bath, loft, living room, and deck—I finally ran into Mike, my guide for the trip, and Kevin, a freelance writer. After some showers, we mingled in the fireplace-warmed lodge, with Moose Drools in hand. Out came Chef—real name Scottie, Debra confided—with a full explanation of the night's fare: a Champagne/France theme, meaning every dish had a touch of the bubbly in it. As the courses were delivered, from shrimp and mushroom croquettes to pork chops with roasted brie, we also discovered the difference between Napa Valley sparkling wines and traditional champagne from France; the latter had far less bubbles, was smoother, and had a more earthy flavor. The red wine also flowed freely, so much so that we even had to break into Scottie's secret stash of *pinotage*, a South Africanized pinot noir. The conversation was also rich—another lodge standard, as Debra explained. "We try to make people feel like they're coming into our home," she told us. By the end of the meal, I was overstuffed, over-talked, and ready for sleep.

The next morning, after eggs, bacon, pastries, and fruit, Mike, Kevin, and I said goodbye while lamenting that it was our last meal there. Then we geared up and headed back toward Moonlight Basin, where the **Spirit of the North dogsled adventure company** awaited our arrival.

THEY LET THE DOGS OUT

There's nothing like watching a dogsled crew prepare. Imagine dozens upon dozens of lanky canines, barking, jumping, and whining as the guides geared up for the morning's 10-mile adventure. And unlike the Hollywood ideal of similar-looking, docile dogs, these Alaskan huskies—a fancy breed name for mutts from a variety of husky bloodlines—were freaking out, for their addiction to running needed satisfaction. The yelping continued as we were told that dogsledding wasn't a native tradition, but rather an invention of Russian gold miners, and were instructed on the easy ways of driving the dog-powered toboggan. The whining subsided as the dogs were attached to the sleds, about a dozen dogs per two- or three-person sled.

Soon, the barking stopped altogether, and the snow slid just a few inches beneath me, as I sat tightly in the sheath-like canvas cockpit. We were off—cruising through the terrain conserved by the Moonlight owners, with mesmerizing views of stark white **Fan Mountain**. Constant wafts of dog poo and occasional flicks of paw-borne snowballs made the experience authentic, and flipping over, which happens even to the best drivers at times, kept it exciting.

But most engaging for all ages was learning about the dogs' funny personalities and distinct histories. Pulling me was Beethoven, an Iditarod veteran; Happy, the most energetic workhorse, set on leaping every time we stopped; and Brit, whose lagging ceased after our guide's well-aimed snowball hit her butt. There are dogs that won't pull for certain guides, others that won't pull for guests. Some pull sleds for 14 years, some stop pulling at age five; retired dogs are then put up for adoption and, according to my guide, make the best pets.

After stopping for cookies and hot chocolate, it was my turn to drive the dogs. I stood atop the toboggan's rails as the dogs began running, leaning into the turns, feeling the power that the dozen possessed, and stomping on the brake to avoid sliding down a steep ski slope (the dog run goes through the Moonlight resort at times). On the way back uphill, as Lone Mountain shadowed the basin, it became clear how ingenious and reliable this alternative transportation is, for the tireless dogs appeared to be doing less work than me. We slid up to the headquarters, and the dogs started yelping again. They wanted more, and so did I.

THE SNOWKITE RODEO IS BORN

After a light lunch in **Bozeman**, we headed west toward the old brick-built mining town of **Butte**, where we ate dinner at the **Uptown Café**, hailed as the region's most upscale eatery. Then we were off to **Anaconda**, our base for the next two days. We checked into the **Hickory House Inn**, where Mary Jane and George welcomed us into their home, and then hit the town running, first downing Jack Daniels at **Club Moderne** and then watching country karaoke at the **ACM bar**. After an early rise and a tasty breakfast, we were off to **Georgetown Lake**, the home of the first ever **Montana Snowkite Rodeo**.

For the fast-growing snowkiting galaxy—a noncompetitive global network of wind-sport enthusiasts who don skis or snowboards, grab 50- to 75-foot kites, and cruise at breakneck speeds across snow-covered lakes, up powdery mountains, and

through whatever landscape is wind-whipped enough—the three-day rodeo over the President's Day weekend was more than just another free-stylin' round-up. Instead, to the applause of snowkiters from Switzerland, France, Norway, Canada, and the U.S., the rodeo boasted the world's first ever **Kiter Cross**, a head-to-head speed contest. For the more than 500 fans who showed up to watch, the Kiter Cross was a hit, as were the trick-based events such as the **Big Air Expression Session** and the **Rail Compitizzle**.

But most exhilarating was seeing the sport's contagious nature, as more than 100 folks—from tiny young girls to graying older men—tried it out for themselves. I was one of those wide-eyed neophytes set on expanding my winter sport horizons beyond downhill snowboarding while experiencing the power of wind. Under the tutelage of a German goddess named Claudia—known globally as “Kite Girl”—we learned how to fly the kites, then donned our own boards or skis and gave it a whirl. It wasn't easy—like blowing bubbles and skipping at the same time—and at times it frustrated like a bad day of fishing, when your lines get tangled after just a cast or two. But by the end, I'd felt the wind's power pull me across the frozen lake and realized that strong winds and icy lakes can be about much more than freezing, cheek-stinging misery.

ON TO 'BOZ-ANGELES'

Our snowkite adventure was punctuated by a Valentine's Day trip to Club Moderne—to see the lovely bartender named Selena—another breakfast from the Hickory House, and a brief trip to **Discovery Basin**, the ski resort that overlooked Georgetown Lake.

By Sunday afternoon, we were back in Bozeman, or “Boz-Angeles,” as Mike, himself a SoCal native, liked to say. The name referred to the “Californication” of the city, typified by brand-new Audi dealerships, whole food co-ops, traffic, and a swanky new wine bar called **Plonk**. But first, we packed our guts with fresh beer and a grilled dinner at the **Montana Ale House**, where my pulled pork sandwich made for a great last Montana meal. Then it was on to Plonk, where, over Chilean *camerones* and an Austrian red, Mike, Kevin, and I reminisced about our experiences, which were surely not like any other press trip ever taken in the great state of Montana. As if old friends, we took the state by storm and tackled every experience with group gusto. I'd never guessed a “business” trip would result in friendships, and that's just another reason why moving to Montana is never far from the back of my mind. ■

Montana Made Easy

• **Moonlight Basin:**

Visit www.moonlightbasin.com or call (406) 993-6000.

• **North Star Dog Sledding:**

Visit www.huskypower.com or call (406) 682-7994.

• **Big River Lodge:**

Visit www.bigriverlodge.com or call (800) 628-1011.

• **Hickory House Inn:**

Visit www.hickoryhouseinn.com or call (866) 563-5481.

• **Big Sky Comfort Suites:**

Visit www.comfortinnbigsky.com or call (800) 228-5150.

• **Bozeman Holiday Inn:**

Visit www.holidayinnbozeman.com or call (800) 366-5101.