

By Kari Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

KREMMLING, Colo. — Bluebird Backcountry in northern Colorado may be the only place of its kind in the world: a ski area with no lifts where it's safe enough to backcountry ski in a wilderness environment — with little risk — even with your tween by your side. A place where day passes cost as little as \$39, no permanent structures mar the landscape, you can sleep onsite in a geodesic dome, and you can ski open bowls and aspen glades all day long, stopping for free bacon served on the trail. Oh, and a place where your well-behaved dog can accompany you anytime.

This ingenious and laid-back ski area was the brainchild of Jeff Woodward, who grew up in Newton and learned to ski Tuckerman's Ravine while a student at Dartmouth. He moved to Colorado in 2007 and fell in love with backcountry skiing (also called ski touring or alpine touring) after many wilderness adventures in the Rockies. For Christmas 2016, Woodward invited his brother Danny from Boston to go ski touring.

"I rented him some gear and took him on a mellow route to Coney's outside Crested Butte," says Woodward. "It basically blew his mind. It got me thinking: 'He wouldn't have tried it unless I got him the gear. Why isn't there a safe place to backcountry ski?'"

Woodward now leases a private cattle ranch in Kremmling for the winter, offering 1,200 acres of avalanche-controlled and ski-patrolled terrain from late December through March (open Thursdays to Mondays only). The property owner runs guided hunting tours in the fall, but come winter for the past three years, Woodward has set up a no-trace seasonal base lodge (made of fabric over a steel frame), developed a trail network with 28 runs and 11 marked skin tracks, and created a ski area that's welcoming for beginner to expert backcountry skiers and splitboarders.

Beginners come to learn the basics of ski touring or try out rental gear before buying,



At Bluebird Backcountry in Colorado, a safe way to go ski touring

whereas experienced skiers often visit at the start of the season for shake-down runs with new gear. Or they may want to practice skiing with their dog in backcountry conditions before tackling unpatrolled areas where the avalanche risks are real. Others, such as a group of women who call themselves the LOLOS (Little Old Ladies On Skis) come for the fun and camaraderie.

Skiers are welcome to camp in their vans in the parking lot or pitch a tent for \$25 per night. Or they can stay in one of four base-area domes, which have beds with mattresses, a wood-burning stove, a kitchen space with pots, dishes, and utensils, and access to an outhouse — all that's needed is a warm sleeping bag and food.

Bluebird Backcountry is located on the Continental Divide at the base of Rabbit Ears Pass in northern Colorado, about 30 minutes from Steamboat Springs and the small town of



PHOTOS BY KARI J. BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Sam Wright, 11, and instructor Ty Sauerbrey do an avalanche beacon check before heading onto Bluebird's trails.

Kremmling (population 1,506), and three hours from Denver. Two mountains fall within its boundaries, but only Bear Mountain is open for skiing, offering more challenging terrain; beginners often head to West Bowl, a hill to the north, for warm-up laps, practice, and instruc-

tion. Resort skiers and riders may appreciate this fact: Bluebird allows just 200 people per day so there's plenty of elbow room.

"It's primarily a place to ski, but we also focus on education," says Woodward.

That's why I took my son

Sam, 11, to Bluebird in January. I love ski touring and have backcountry experience, but I'm not knowledgeable enough to teach someone else. I wanted Sam to learn how to backcountry ski in a safe environment from a certified instructor.

"We love kids," said Ty Sauerbrey, our BC2 guide, who noted that most kids who ski Bluebird range from about 10 years old and up — old enough to follow instructions, strong enough to ski off-piste for a few hours, and big enough to fit the rental gear (touring skis go down to 120cm and the smallest boots are 22.5 in mondo sizing).

Bluebird offers everything from a two-hour Ski with a Mentor experience that lets you hit the slopes with an instructor, ask questions, and practice skills (a great deal at \$35) to women's clinics, Skiing with Your Dog instruction, Ski Mountaineering, and other classes geared to all levels of skiers and splitboarders (it's holding three more hut-based avalanche training courses in March). It also offers Beacon-Seeking Saturday, when several avalanche beacons are buried near The Perch warming hut, so skiers can practice their search and rescue skills.

Since Sam and I have some basic ski touring experience and understand the gear, we signed up for Backcountry 2: Moving through the Backcountry. Our small class included Gloucester-native Andrew McNamee and partner Eleanor Rush, who live in Denver.

You can bring your own gear or rent on site — the ski area has a big selection of high-end equipment, including Black Diamond, Elan, and Dynafit skis with Dynafit bindings, and K2 and Dynafit boots. We chatted about gear first — what size day-packs work the best, what to pack in a wilderness first aid kit, and why it's essential to carry lots of universal screws, duct tape, and ski straps in your repair kit. Then we strapped on skis and shuffled past the après firepits toward the West Bowl Skin Track.

Unlike in the true backcountry, ski patrol remains on hand in case you get hurt or need help.

When you head out on the trail here, you pass through an archway where a staffer scans your ticket — that's how they know you're on the trail. You get scanned back in when you return, and patrollers will head out to find you if you don't report back by the end of the day.

We spent the next few hours learning how to move efficiently through the wilderness, adjust layers to prevent overheating, and make different kinds of turns while ascending steep slopes, including "seashell," A-V-A, and kick turns. At the top of one small hill, Sauerbrey taught us how to pull our skins off without removing our skis — a great lesson in balance and technique — and offered tips on how to ski powder and stay off our edges (helpful for people like me and McNamee, who grew up carving on New England hardpack and ice).

We stopped off for lunch in The Perch warming hut, where a staff member grills bacon throughout the day and hands it out for free to skiers — a very popular perk. The warming hut — also a fabric and steel-framed dome — has a wood stove, recycled astroturf on the floor, a couple of picnic tables, and the bacon grill. It's the perfect place to strip off a layer, recharge, and debate whether gummy bears taste good wrapped in bacon (they do, according to Sam).

After a morning spent skiing open hillsides, our group decided to skin up through a forest to the top of West Bowl at 9,300 feet and descend through a stunning aspen grove. We fell, cheered each other on, and did our best to keep up with Sam, who fearlessly dodged trees, ducked through narrow passages beneath branches, and hooted with joy all the way to the track that led us back to the base area.

For a snowy Saturday midwinter, we saw only a few dozen people all day, including participants of a women's backcountry clinic, several small groups or couples, and a bunch of happy dogs.

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A long ride to save the vacation

►**COSTA RICA**
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tions for a couple of minutes, but there was really no debate: We were going to fight like hell to make that flight.

My parents headed to the airport and waited in the car rental line for more than three hours with other wary and upset travelers. They felt bad taking one of the limited cars when so many people were stranded because of the problems plaguing Southwest Airlines at the time. But they also missed the beach and deserved a vacation, so they grabbed any car they could find, which ended up being a black Honda CRV with not-very-comfortable back seats.

My brother, Jake, and I gathered supplies while they were gone, piling chips and drinks next to the suitcases. When my parents got back, it was almost 1 p.m., allowing limited wiggle room for our 10 a.m. flight the following day.

We all started the journey with a strangely positive spirit, and dad praised our optimistic attitudes. I passed around drinks, and we tried to figure out what to do for the next million hours. (Given somewhat recent news about Adnan Syed's vacated conviction, we decided to listen to the first season of Sarah Koenig's podcast "Serial," from 2014, outlining the case.) Every three to four hours, we changed drivers and their front seat companion. Jake sat shotgun with my dad when he drove, and I sat with my mom. Our official role was to keep our parents awake. But around midnight, Jake was failing at his job, drifting in and out of sleep.

Actual tumbleweeds crossed the highway in front of us, some big enough that you could hear a loud thwack as they hit the front of the car. There wasn't much to look at aside from wide open spaces, industrial plants, and the occasional small town. It really seemed like it was us against the world, desperately clawing our way to the coast.

While my dad and Jake tried to curl up in the backseat, my



MADDIE BROWNING

The author (right) and her family made it to Costa Rica.

mom and I were practically holding our eyes open in the front seats at 2 a.m. My mom insisted on chewing gum to keep herself awake, but for some reason we only had the holiday version of Hubba Bubba Bubble Tape. I tore off fresh pieces for her every hour.

Jake and I knew this journey would be excruciating, so before we left, we did some research. We found one potentially thrilling stop on this excursion: our first trip to Buc-ee's. If you've never heard of Buc-ee's, think Wawa of the South. If you're still confused, it is essentially a convenience store/gas station that people are really passionate about, complete with a mascot and aisles of merchandise with Bucky the Beaver's face on it.

My mom and I were able to sleep intermittently for about an hour in the backseat before we were woken up by my dad saying, "We're here," as we pulled up to one of the Buc-ee's locations around 4 a.m. A fun fact about me is that when I'm really tired, I get super nauseous. Of course, by this point I was exhausted, so as my family walked around looking for the ideal Buc-ee's merch, I ran to the bathroom.

I emerged from the stalls still not in a good place, but ready to rally. Buc-ee's also proudly displays many different types of jerky, so I fast-walked past the

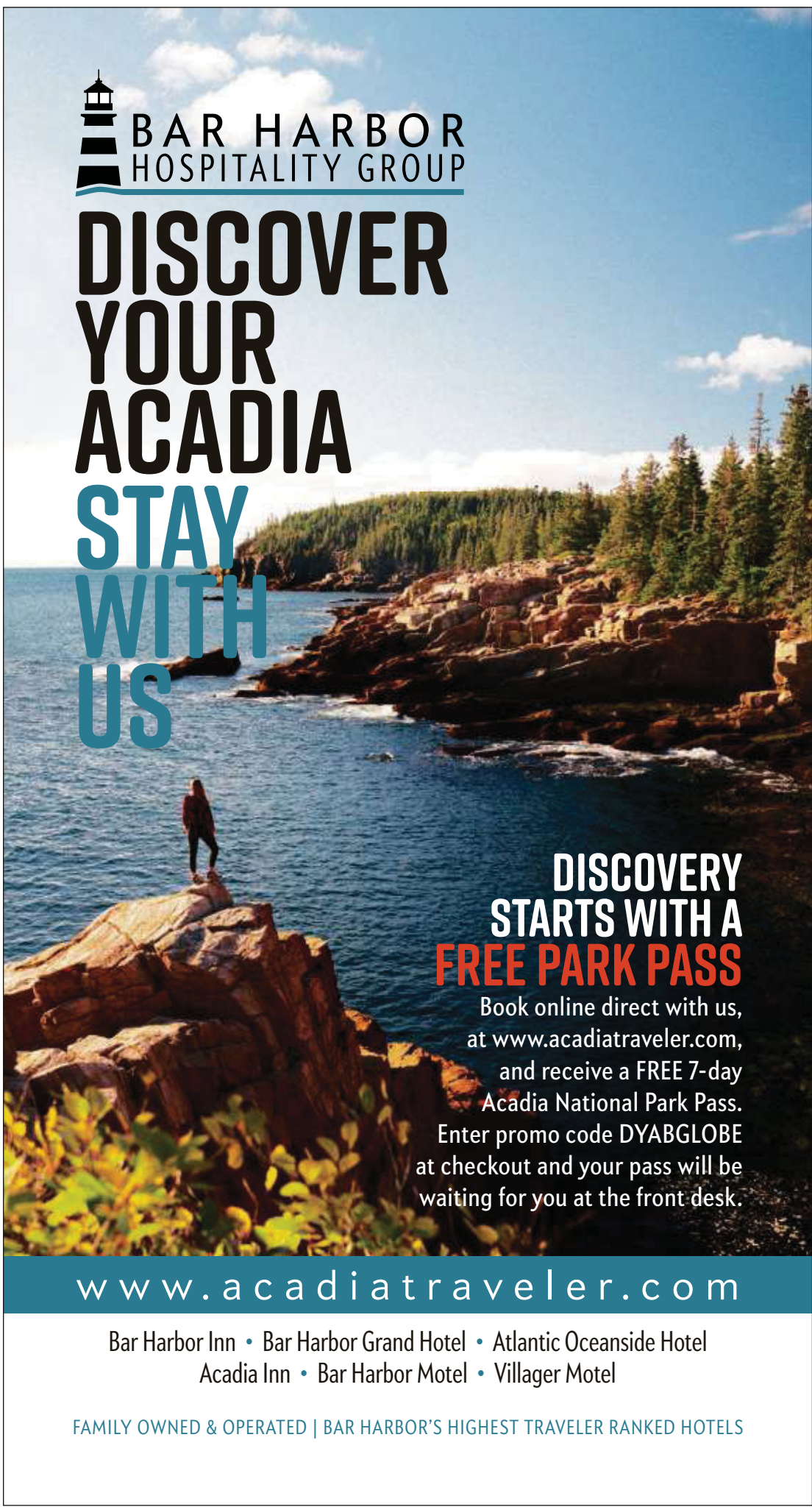
display case trying not to gag. I grabbed a Dramamine pill and shirt with Bucky on it (it says "Go little rockstar," which is funny, considering) and we were on our way.

We pulled into the car rental station in Houston at 6 a.m., determined to persevere. We unloaded our stuff onto a bus and set off yet again toward the airport. Walking up to the Southwest ticket counter, I held my breath. It would either be a week in Costa Rica . . . or a week in Houston. We hesitantly set our passports on the counter, and when the ticket attendant handed us our boarding passes, we all sighed with relief.

We'd made it.

Our gate had a Chick-fil-A, so Jake and my dad rushed over for Chick-n-Minis and coffee. I didn't want an encore of the Buc-ee's incident, so I tried to curl up and fall asleep until the plane boarded.

When we finally touched down in Costa Rica, we thought the traumatic car rides were over. Little did we know it was just the beginning. We were handed the rental car keys and sent on a path up winding, unpaved mountain roads, teetering above thousand-foot drops. A local affectionately called this jarring experience a "Costa Rican massage." Thank god we'd sprung for full insurance coverage at the rental place.





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