

SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE NOVEMBER 17, 2024 | BOSTONGLOBE.COM/TRAVEL

What's in store for New England's skiers and snowboarders?

By Matt Pepin | GLOBE STAFF

Hopefully not a repeat of last season.

Added my voice to the chorus that sang the sad song of the 2023-24 ski season in New England. On chairlifts and in lodges, in online forums and media, and in and around Boston, it was common to hear skiers and snowboarders lamenting the unpredictability and inconsistency of winter, expressing skepticism about the future of skiing, and telling tales of how it's just not like they remember it back in the day. I'm with them. Based on last season's experiences and ongoing climate change, never before have I worried so much about what skiing and snowboarding in New England will look like in the future. I feel confident it will exist, but in what form I'm not sure. Will the days of fully open resorts with boundary-to-boundary skiing be limited to

just a few months each year? Will smaller areas, especially those south of the Vermont/New Hampshire border, be viable at all? Skiing has always been about the quest for great conditions and dealing with one of the most unpredictable forces on Earth — Mother Nature. But the warning signs seem bigger in recent years. In 2023, there was record winter warmth in New England, including a 62-degree day in February, and not much real snow. By March 2024, Boston had gone more than 700 days without a significant snowfall. Of course ski country is a very different beast than the city, and microclimates and other geographic variables (Hello Jay Cloud!) give the mountains of New England a boost, but I shudder to think about what skiing would be like without man-made snow. Beyond the data, however, there's plenty of **SNOW SPORTS, Page N14**



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION ALLY RZESA/GLOBE STAFF, ADOBE

9 top gear picks for the slopes

By Kari Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Much of this year's gear offers versatility — skis, boots, and boards that excel on a wide variety of terrain, clothing that works in different conditions, and other gear and gadgets that prove useful from one season to the next. Find out about gear made by former professional racers — a few right here in Boston — and wearable products that support good causes and even the environment.

Buy custom skis or build your own — in Boston

The brainchild for Parlor skis was born in a Cambridge funeral home — among three college friends-turned-pro ski racers — and the idea soon developed into a full-fledged successful company in East Boston that produces custom and semi-custom skis and snowboards (and now ranks



JULIANNA JIMREIVAT/BLACK DIAMOND

Black Diamond's Factor Shell jacket and Factor Bibs.

as New England's largest ski manufacturer). Here, off Highway 1A and within eyeshot of Logan Airport, cofounder Mark Wallace and his small team handcraft skis and boards perfectly suited to a client's body type, skiing or riding style, and preferred snow conditions, dialing in the best length, sidecut,

rocker, flex pattern, type of wood, and even preferred graphics (puppies and unicorns — no problem). This year's new semi-custom ski is the Osprey, a jack-of-all-trades carving ski that's stable as it rips across the mountain yet has some tail rocker so you can dump speed and main-

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12 days of hiking bliss on Tour du Mont Blanc

By Mark Arsenault
GLOBE STAFF

CHAMONIX, France — What is the greatest long-distance hiking trail in the world? That is a matter of opinion, of course, but for knee-buckling scenery, physical and mental challenge, and the availability of trailside cappuccino, it would be hard to beat the Tour du Mont Blanc. The TMB, as it is called, is a roughly 107-mile loop entirely around the base of 15,766-foot Mont Blanc, the king of the Alps, a massive, photogenic white peak streaked with glaciers near the corner of France, Italy, and Switzerland. The TMB passes through all three countries and hikers spend a few days in each. Completing the TMB is a terrific way to experience European food and culture, as well as an ideal introduction to long-distance trekking, as my wife, Jen-

nifer, and I found this past July when we hiked the famous trail over 12 days. If you enjoy sleeping on the ground, choking down rehydrated meals, and "bathing" with a wet wipe, sure, you can do the TMB that way. Or you can stay in boutique hotels and rustic mountain huts, dine each night at a great restaurant, and have a hot shower every day. We did the TMB that second way. The one with the showers. Our unguided hike started in Chamonix, France, an Aspen-like resort town, packed with restaurants, hotels, and many outdoorsy gear shops. From Chamonix, we hiked the TMB counterclockwise, over rugged high passes, through small French hamlets, and then crossed the border into Italy on Day 4. There's no border control, just a festive set of flags on a

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Trying to remain chill about downhill weather

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real-life evidence that really illustrates how and why my ski seasons have become filled with worry and concern.

Last fall, I booked a long weekend at Loon for the first January weekend after the holidays.

Before making the decision to splurge on slopeside accommodations, my family's primary concern was what if a storm comes along and prevents us from getting there — an important factor since there could be penalties for changing or canceling reservations, and getting everyone's calendar in sync was challenging anyway.

In fact, Loon's location right off Interstate 93 was a major factor in the decision so we would minimize the possibility of traveling on snow-covered back roads if bad weather materialized.

In the past, January always felt safe to book an overnight trip because you could generally rely on good conditions — ski areas always beef up for the holiday week — at that point in the season.

Not last year. When we arrived, Loon was just shy of having half of its trails open. There was good skiing thanks to man-made snow, but the slopes were congested because of the terrain limitations. We still had a great time and, coincidentally, ended up driving home in a moderate snowstorm.

Weather concerns were not as much of a factor when I planned my second overnight trip last season because this time there was considerably more schedule flexibility and I'd be using a four-wheel drive SUV instead of a family minivan to go to Sunday River in early February. But in December, weather again became a factor.

Flooding from a rainstorm that hammered Maine had a devastating impact on Sunday River, including washing out the road to the Grand Summit Hotel, where we were staying.



MATT PEPIN/GLOBE STAFF

On Jan. 5, the summit of Loon Mountain had plenty of snow but the area had less than half of its trails open.

The road was repaired and by the time we arrived, conditions were solid, and Sunday River had a good amount of terrain open. But once again, worrying about the weather was front of mind, not visions of a winter wonderland.

The rest of the winter followed a pattern of uncertainty. Time and again I planned to go skiing, using carryover vacation to take weekdays off for day trips, only to have plans disrupted by warm weather or rain in the forecast, sketchy conditions because all the freeze-thaw cycles left slopes covered in ice, and a variety of other factors.

In fact, by the time St. Patrick's Day weekend rolled around, I had used my IndyPass only once, a realization that led to the immediate development of

“Operation Make My Pass Worth It.” This was an ambitious strategy because finding good skiing at that point in the season was going to require quite a bit of driving, but nonetheless I dropped a pin on Jay Peak and Cannon and decided to have faith in my belief that Mother Nature is as unpredictable as it gets and you never know what she might bring.

That faith was tested. On a solo drive to Jay Peak in Vermont on Saturday (4 hours each way from my home) and again on the drive with my son riding shotgun to Cannon Mountain in New Hampshire on Sunday (2.5 hours), persistent rain had me questioning the decision to even go at all.

Challenging conditions greeted ski-

ers both days, and at least one required waiting out a rain delay while we were all geared up in the parking lot. The good news was I was able to park right next to the lodges, and the better news was that both days turned out great, making the drive, the worrying, and yes, my pass, worth it.

Much has been made about climate change and the future of skiing in New England, and it's alarming. I've used my snowblower far less in recent years, and purchased less heating oil, and I haven't had as many ski trips canceled as I had last year in quite some time. I even picked tomatoes from my garden throughout October, which has never happened in the 15 years I've lived in the suburbs west of Boston.

Check out these 9 top gear picks for the slopes

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tain control. You choose from a library of fun and colorful graphics, select a ski length — from 162cm to 186cm — and then wait patiently for four to six weeks as the skis come to life. Or build your own ski or snowboard. Sign-up opens in December (and sells out quickly) for Parlor's two-day build clinics running April through September during which you meet with designers and ski- and snowboard makers to craft your own custom plank(s). \$1,675 custom; \$1,075-\$1,175 semi-custom; \$2,200 for two-day build class. <https://parlor-skis.com>



This puffy will keep you warm

When the temps dip or winds kick up, put Katabatic Gear's Tincup jacket under your ski shell to add a layer of warmth, or slip it on during breaks while snowshoeing or cross-country skiing. The latest version of this 850-fill down jacket has a relaxed fit, easy-access inner pockets, and expanded sizes (it comes in small to XXL in men's and women's versions). The jacket, designed by Katabatic Gear founder and AMC thru-hiker Aaron Martray, blends responsibly sourced down with a lightweight, breathable Pertex Quantum fabric that helps trap warmth and repel snow and drizzle. It has baffles that help keep the down loft evenly distributed throughout the jacket, extra length in the back for additional warmth, elastic cuffs, zippered hand-warmer pockets, and a strip of material — a draft blocker — on the zipper to help keep out the cold. \$299. <https://katabaticgear.com>



A burly wind- and waterproof kit

Neither wind nor wet snow — or even this winter's strongest nor'easter — will likely penetrate Black Diamond's new Factor Shell and Factor Bibs, all-mountain ski and snowboard gear available in men's and women's versions. The rugged waterproof yet breathable jacket and bibs work great whether you're skinning up a mountain, carving



down groomers at the resort, or leaning into a soggy whiteout as you head off for après. The shell has a built-in powder skirt, two-way armpit zips that work with gloves on, a helmet-compatible hood, and a built-in chamois on the collar to prevent chafing. You'll have plenty of places to stash an extra goggle lens, hand warmers, a snack, and other essentials: The jacket comes with two mesh drop-in pockets inside, two chest pockets and two hand pockets on the front, and a zippered pocket on the left arm for your ski pass. Slip your smartphone or other gear into the Factor Bibs' two large thigh pockets or the chest pocket. The bibs also have zippered sides for venting and easy on-off access, adjustable shoulder straps, and built-in gaiters. The roomy jacket and bibs come with built-in RECCO transponders and incorporate Black Diamond's proprietary water- and wind-proof technology so you can stay dry when that nor'easter comes ripping through. \$625 each. www.blackdiamondequipment.com

A proven way to stay warm

An Indigenous- and woman-owned company in Canada's Northwest Territories makes products that keep outdoor adventurers warm down to extreme winter temperatures, are reusable and sustainable, and provide longer-lasting warmth than disposable or battery-powered alternatives. Aurora Heat, run by Brenda Dragon of Dènes iné descent in Northern Canada, makes hand warmers, foot warmers, and a variety of body warmers using ethically sourced beaver fur — in a respectful way that produces zero waste. The sheared fur is silky-soft, dense yet breathable, odor-resistant, and supremely warm (after all, beavers swim in frigid Canadian waters all winter). The warmers tuck into pockets and gloves, under hats and ski pants, and in winter boots, and provide significant warmth (even when wet) without causing you to overheat. Place the fur side toward your body and the warmer traps the heat and helps insulate your body. The naturally biodegradable warmers last about 10 years. A portion of each purchase supports Indigenous youth and provides living-wage jobs to people in remote communities. \$29.99 (thumb

warmers) to \$169.99 (ultra hand warmers). <https://auroraheat.com>

Cold-weather garments for a good cause

Stay toasty on the slopes with hats, neck gaiters, and fleece-lined headbands that are designed and sold in the United States but ethically made by women in Nepal. HeadPeace produces fun and colorful lightweight hats that fit nicely under a ski helmet, fleece-lined headbands that keep your ears warm — all made with a polyester and spandex knit blend — and gaiters (made with rayon and spandex knit) for keeping your neck and chin protected in the cold. Lindsay Theken, an outdoorsy mom and entrepreneur in Colorado, teamed up with a fair-trade company in Nepal called Purnaa that helps women — many of whom are coming out of dangerous or exploitive situations — get back on their feet by providing safe jobs in the garment industry. The HeadPeace products come to life in the hands of these women and are then sold at US boutiques and online through HeadPeace.org. \$23 lined headbands, \$24 gaiters, \$28 hats. <https://headpeace.org>



Safety gear for out-of-bounds

The latest avalanche safety gear from Backcountry Access (BCA) works great whether you're venturing into the backcountry for an afternoon tour or dipping into side-country terrain from a main resort. The new Tracker S Avalanche Transceiver (not to be confused with the older BCA beacon with the same name) has a sleek and ergonomic design, weighs just 5.5 ounces, and sports a 1.7-inch vibrant screen. A new switch locks in Search mode so novice or flustered users can't accidentally change to Transmit mode in an emergency. The company's newest two-way radio, the BC Link Mini, helps you keep in close communication with fellow skiers and snowmobilers, for instance, during adventures or searches. The small, easy-to-use radio has just two no-brainer buttons and an integrat-



ed battery (no dangling cords or external battery unit), and it comes with three options for connecting the device to a pack and a small leash and clip for backup protection. Use BCA's new Stash 12 pack for short backcountry or side-country excursions. It holds the essentials — shovel, probe, snack, skins, and water, with loops for attaching a radio — and has a chairlift-friendly low profile. \$299.95 beacon; \$99 radio; \$99 pack. <https://backcountryaccess.com>



A boot for front, side, and backcountry fun

No need to buy multiple ski boots to fit your many different adventure modes. Fischer's new freeride boot has a top secret-sounding code name, but it doesn't hide the

fact that it's a versatile, all-mountain boot that can tackle almost any terrain. Meet the RC4 Pro MV DYN BOA — translation: RC4 professional-level boots suitable for mid-volume feet that work with alpine and tech bindings with a Dynafit pin-style toe but no heel piece (such as Kingpin, CAST, and Shift bindings), and come with a BOA dial-up lacing system (so-called because it coils up like a snake). These boots also have no-slip GripWalk soles, which provide traction from slippery slopes to icy parking lots. The stiff yet comfortable, micro-adjustable boots fit many types of feet. Since they have no “walk” mode and weigh significantly more than a dedicated touring boot, you won't choose the RC4 Pro for a big day in the backcountry. It's geared more for shorter uphill outings — they're comfortable enough to handle quick boot packs or skinning up smaller side- or backcountry sections — and then ripping down whatever crud, crust, or corduroy the trail presents you. The RC4 ZipFit liner locks in your heel to prevent slippage and chafing and lets you further dial in the right fit. The boot has a BOA dial for fine-tuning the fit in the forefoot area and two buckles and a power strap to lock in your stance for some hard-charging on the downhill. Overall, a pricey but performance-driven boot that can do multiple jobs. \$1,049.99. www.fischersports.com

A watch for all your adventures

Record your ski runs, cross-country ski mileage, snowshoe routes, and more with Amazfit's new T-Rex 3 GPS watch. This multi-function watch has a 1.5-inch, vibrant screen (made of durable Gorilla Glass so it can withstand “yard sales”), a robust battery that lasts up to 42 hours in active GPS mode, and technology to track your performance during more than 170 sports and activities, making it useful year-round. For downhill skiing and snowboarding, it can record your number of runs, vertical descent, and max downhill speed and gradient, for instance. Off resort, use it to

The outlook for this winter isn't great, either. Boston Globe meteorologist Ken Mahan is forecasting that “most signals suggest New England will experience yet another warmer-than-average winter with pretty much above-normal precipitation like last winter.”

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration also says in its 2024 winter outlook that New England can expect warm temperatures and that there are “equal chances of below-average, near-average, or above-average seasonal total precipitation.”

If that's not the very definition of uncertainty, I don't know what is.

But there's the possibility of a La Niña weather pattern that could tilt things in favor of skiers and snowboarders, according to Mahan, so I'm thinking there's a chance for a better season. There have also been some good early signs, including an October dump of enough natural snow at places like Sugarbush and Jay Peak to allow a few hardy souls the chance to go poach the early powder and Sunday River's special Halloween ski day.

The doom and gloom hovering over skiing hasn't turned me away yet, and I don't think it's pushed any ski area operators to the sideline just yet either. It's encouraging to see investment in chairlift upgrades at places like Berkshire East and Wachusett in Massachusetts, and even Ski Sundown in Connecticut. It's encouraging to see more investment in snowmaking at places like Magic Mountain and Killington in Vermont, and even the preservation of some of classic New England ski areas like Black Mountain of New Hampshire.

In that spirit of optimism, I did what any other diehard New England skier would do this summer: I bought new ski boots and renewed my pass.

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navigate trails and backcountry terrain (it has a compass and altimeter), track mileage, follow barometric trends that indicate changing weather (turn on storm alerts), and retrace your route. Download maps on to the watch through the Zepp app. The T-Rex 3 even has modes for Nordic skiing, biathlon, ski orienteering, bobsled and tobogganing, and sledding. \$279. <https://us.amazfit.com>

A super versatile freestyle board

You can likely trust the design sense of a snowboard legend who is a three-time Olympic gold medalist in the sport and holds the most X Games gold medals of any snowboarder in history. Retired competitor Shaun White and his brother Jesse launched Whitespace a few years ago and produce snowboards, goggles, and clothing (from baselayers and outerwear to hoodies). Whitespace's new version of the Shaun White Freestyle Pro snowboard checks all the boxes: It can handle park, powder, and piste and all the glades in between, offering snappy performance in the park to quick turns in the trees. The directional twin board has a camber profile for great maneuverability at speed, a poplar and paulownia core, and full-length carbon inserts and the company's signature double-weave fiberglass base to add pop. It comes in a mid-range of sizes — from 150cm to 162cm (including two wide boards) — with a mini-me Youth Shaun White Freestyle Pro in 130cm and 136cm. By design, the board runs shorter for quicker, more responsive turns and controlled speed. Also check out Whitespace's new Magnetic MD Icon Goggles that offer a wide-angle field of view and come with an easy-to-swap magnetic “death-grip” lens that won't fall out when you adjust your goggles on the lift. \$649. <https://whitespacesnow.com>

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