

Letting North Conway feed, ease, and exercise you

By Necee Regis | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 12, 2014



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Main Street has something for browsers and buyers, snackers and diners.

NORTH CONWAY VILLAGE — The sun was bright, the air piney-fresh as I toiled along Main Street — a.k.a. Route 16 White Mountain Highway — en route to my bed-and-breakfast in the town of Glen. Some visitors travel to this part of the state to hike in the White Mountain National Forest, tackle the rock-climbing cliffs at Cathedral Ledge, or ski at Cranmore, Black, Wildcat, and other mountain resorts. Still others enjoy the sport of outlet shopping. I simply wanted a quick and stress-free getaway, a place to unplug and enjoy some unplanned pleasures. A three-hour drive from Boston, Mount Washington Valley seemed the perfect

escape.

It's an easy eight-block stroll along the brick sidewalks of Main Street in North Conway Village where storefront shops exude old-time charm. I spent half a day meandering through small, independent businesses offering everything from sporting goods to candles, children's clothing to cigars, and half of my half-day was spent immersed in the aisles of Zeb's General Store.

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With its simple wooden shelves, 67-foot-long penny candy counter, bottles of Coca-Cola, and old-fashioned toys such as jigsaw puzzles, checkers, dominoes, and sling shots, Zeb's is basically peddling nostalgia. Specializing in products made in New England — books, birdhouses, bath soaps, lotions, kitchen accessories, T-shirts, caps, Christmas items, and a vast array of specialty foods — Zeb's manages to create a homey atmosphere while offering more than 5,000 unique items in over 6,000 square feet of retail space. Half the fun is simply looking at it all. If your stamina flags, free coffee and food samples provide energy for more shopping.

As an aficionado of thrift and consignment shops — because you never know what treasure you may find — I was thrilled to discover It's My Girlfriend's Consignment Boutique in the lobby of the Eastern Slope Inn, specializing in vintage and contemporary fashions. Offerings include clothes, shoes, handbags, jewelry, and other accessories.

At the White Mountain Cupcakery, a locally owned bakery, I found hard-to-resist cupcake varieties such as Refreshing Lemon (lemon zesty cake and filling), Fresh Carrot (carrot cake with cream cheese frosting), Snickerdoodle (cinnamon cake and frosting), and my personal favorite, the Chocolate Avalanche (chocolate cake, frosting, and flakes). Chocoholics make a beeline to the Bavarian Chocolate Haus where all confections — chocolate peanut clusters, turtles, caramels, nonpareils, truffles, and more — are made by hand.

Weather enthusiasts and children will enjoy the Mount Washington Observatory Weather Discovery Center, an interactive museum exploring the science of climate and weather. Enter

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a replica of the observatory's original summit weather station and experience what it was like when the world record-setting 231-mile-per-hour winds were recorded; try your hand at being a TV weatherperson using digital weather maps; touch and see a tornado to see how it is formed; purchase books and other items in the Weather Store; and, twice a day, view a live feed and chat with resident meteorologists on the summit of Mount Washington.

The centerpiece of Main Street is the restored 1874 Boston & Maine railroad station. Looking much like a tiered ochre, red, and green cake, the station is home to the Conway Scenic Railway. The rail company operates two vintage passenger trains, the Valley Train and the Notch Train. Depending on the route, trains pass panoramic vistas of mountains, farmlands, cliffs, ravines, and rivers. Round-trip excursions vary from 55 minutes to 5½ hours with seating choices in coach, first class, or a dining car.

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This year marks the railway's 40th anniversary, and festivities are planned on Aug. 4. Before then, special deals include Mother's Day when moms ride free in coach when accompanied by one or more children. (Same deal for dads on Father's Day.) I was lucky to visit on the weekend of the Murder Mystery Dinner Train, a three-hour, adult-only excursion that included a live theatrical who-done-it featuring an extensive cast of actors, and a four-course meal. The next mystery-dinner, "Death at Club 54 — It's a Groovy Kind of Murder!" is June 7.

Many hotels and inns offer Murder Mystery Train packages, including the place where I stayed, the Bernerhof Inn, as well as Cranmore Mountain Lodge, Buttonwood Inn, Bartlett Inn, and more that are listed on the railway website.

Entering the sprawling Bernerhof Inn felt like visiting the home of a relative or friend. The dozen rooms and suites are newly decorated and comfortable, and the public areas, including the Black Bear Pub — serving wine and local micro brews — are welcoming. I settled into a lounge chair near the bar one night to watch the Red Sox on a large screen TV, and chatted with other guests. The inn also offers three-hour cooking classes at its Taste of the Mountains Cooking School, and the Serenity Wellness Studio is the place to get pampered.

There are two easy hikes a short distance from North Conway Village. In fact, my first excursion to Cathedral Ledge involved little more than driving up a mile-long route in Echo Lake Park, parking, and walking a short distance through the woods. After crossing rocky outcroppings and gnarled tree roots, I reached the 700-foot-high ledge with its stunning vista across the Saco River Valley to the White Mountains.

It's a little over a half-mile trek on well-marked and managed trails to Diana's Bath, a series of waterfalls within the White Mountain National Forest. The location of a sawmill operation

in the 1800s, the waterfalls are now a place where families, and their pooches, can experience the wilderness without excessive effort. Pack a lunch and eat at one of the picnic tables, and watch the falls cascade down rocky ledges into a series of pools. This is part of the US National Forest System. There is a self-service pay station in the parking lot where you can purchase a daily pass to display in your vehicle.

The area offers many healthy and tasty eating options. Restaurants, hoteliers, and farmers in Washington Valley have partnered to form Valley Originals, an organization designed to bring wholesome, organic, and local foods to diners. For guaranteed fresh, farm-to-table ingredients, look for a yellow logo of a fork and plate on signs and menus that identify participating organizations.

Delaney's, a family-owned and self-proclaimed "hole in the wall" restaurant and tavern, serves a full pub-style menu with wings, burgers, salads, pizza, lobster mac and cheese, steak, ribs, seafood, and more. Everything is made from scratch including soups, sauces, artisan breads, and dessert. There is also a second menu with an extensive selection of sushi including maki, temaki, sashimi, tempura, and chef's specials.

At the Margarita Grill, another farm-to-table and family-owned restaurant, I sampled Southwest-inspired dishes that blended influences from many cuisines including Mexican, Hispanic, Native American, Creole, Cajun, and more. All salsas are homemade, as are spice rubs for seafood and meats. In addition to such favorites as quesadillas, fajitas, tacos, and enchiladas, the menu offers burgers, salads, pasta, and ribs.

Too soon, my idyll was over. After shopping, hiking, eating, and basically lollygagging for the weekend, I returned home relaxed, refreshed, and ready to plan my next visit.

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