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Resurrection

Travel East

Eric Vohr · Dec 18, 2003

Usually, when ski areas die, they stay dead. New England has lost its share over the past two decades, as weather, economics and the increasingly higher standards of ever-more-demanding customers weeded out the smaller hills. Now it's getting one back. Almost 15 years after it went dark, Crotched Mountain, an 875-vertical-foot, north-facing area in southern New Hampshire, is poised for revival. Its rise from retirement has captured the imaginations of local followers, many of whom have fond memories of past days spent playing on its slopes.

Crotched once comprised two]separate ski areas—Crotched East and Crotched West—in the hamlet of Bennington, N.H. Each had its own history. The original Crotched Mountain—which would become Crotched East—opened in 1964; West followed in 1969, then known as Onset. In 1977, Onset changed hands and was renamed Bobcat. Then it merged with Crotched in 1981. But the lifts at both hills stopped running in 1990, when owners, battered by weather woes and an anemic economy, decided they'd lost enough money. Now to the rescue comes Peak Resorts (see sidebar, page 18E), which bought Crotched West and plans to reopen this season. Crotched East remains closed.

Of course, the mountains haven't been sitting entirely dormant. Hardy locals and other earn-your-turns enthusiasts have been poaching these trails religiously for years—without the benefit of lifts or grooming. When I got the assignment last season to write about Crotched in advance of its reopening, I learned I would have to do the same. At the time, there wasn't a single working lift on-site—or even a snowcat that might deliver me to the summit. Snowmaking consisted of a pile of pipes lying in a muddy parking lot. But I met up with Marketing Director John Tyler and another employee, Matt Risley, and together we requisitioned a couple of snowmobiles to help us tackle Crotched in the raw.

Obviously, this is not a story about acres of sweet corduroy, whirring high-speed quads and fancy lodges overflowing with amenities. Last season's Crotched consisted of an old building sitting in the middle of a field littered with bulldozers, steel pipe and welding [gear](#) next to a huge, ugly hole where the owners were digging a new snowmaking reservoir. The trails—neglected for so many years—were strewn with freshly blasted rock, stumps, dirt piles and lift remnants, including treacherous concrete lift-tower pads left behind after Jiminy Peak, Mass., cannibalized the old quad chair on the Canyon trail. Add five feet of snow capped with a layer of crust, and you get the picture. It reminded me of the stories my grandfather told of his trips to Stowe, Vt., in the '40s, when he faced similar conditions and had to ski-pack the trails to get a decent run in. But one thing shone through all that mess: Crotched Mountain has character—rolling trails that dip and dive through the hardwoods—and when its new owners bring it back to life in December, New England city-dwellers will have another alternative to the long drive north.

On my first day, we started up the mountain and snaked our way past a couple of 35-ton, six-wheel-drive Caterpillar articulated rock trucks and a mean-looking Komatsu D155 bulldozer that weighed in at 40 tons. As I rode up the mountain with my [skis](#) across my lap, I began to sense the magic and history of Crotched. We made our way along an access trail that led to the summit, and I could almost taste the flavor of old Onset, with her wooden skis, leather lace-up boots and wool apparel—the no-grooming, no-frills experience that was New England skiing in the mid- to late-1960s.

Our destination was a once-popular trail called Upper Zeke's Peak. It wasn't an easy journey. Our snowmobiles bobbed and weaved, and if we happened to wander off the beaten path, we rolled over and got stuck in the deep snow. But eventually we reached the rusted bull-wheel of the old summit lift. We strapped on our gear, and I got my first taste of Peak Resorts' latest project.

After a few runs of smashing through the crust, I remembered my father's stories of the Harvard ski team at the Weber Cup in 1954. The team had to pack the famous Wildcat Trail on the way up so they could race it on the way down. This gave me an idea. Back in the mud pit at the base of the mountain, Risley and I rummaged through the pile of discarded debris around the construction office and found a few pieces of expanded steel and some sturdy webbing. With a little imagination, it wasn't long before we had rigged a couple of do-it-yourself groomers to pull behind our sleds. After dragging them up the mountain—again, not an easy task—we began making passes down Zeke's. Our groomers worked surprisingly well, and before long, we had cleared off a nice little track, upon which we spent the afternoon ripping run after run.

I'd like to say we groomed the whole mountain, but that was impossible, of course. I did get to ski each and every trail, though, and I quickly learned that the place has soul. It was hard to imagine what it would be like all cleaned up, but it was clear there are some sweet runs. And if Peak Resorts delivers on its promises, this could easily be one of the best resorts in the region.

The new Crotched Mountain will be unrecognizable to anyone who recalls the derelict jumble of broken-down lifts and vandalized buildings that littered its base area as recently as last fall. Peak Resorts quickly went to work tearing down and cleaning up.

Co-owner Margrit Kagi says Peak plans to spend \$8—\$9 million before the lifts spin in mid-December. Snowmaking is the biggest investment: Crotched now has a new 20 million-gallon reservoir and 100 snowguns—enough, Kagi says, to cover the entire area with at least a foot of snow in three days. Lights have been installed on all trails, and by mid-January, Kagi says, Crotched plans to remain open until 3 a.m. for weekly Midnight Madness sessions, which have been a big hit among church and youth groups at Peak Resorts' Midwestern properties.

Four new chairlifts and one carpet lift have also been installed over the summer, and a new 40,000-square-foot lodge has been built, which will house the rental operation.

One of the added bonuses of Crotched is that it's not one of those lonesome resorts marooned in the middle of nowhere. The region is already a destination spot, filled with quaint towns, scenic country roads and plenty of musty antiques shops. Mt. Monadnock is only a few minutes away, and nearby Peterborough, a 10-minute drive, is one of those classic little New England towns well worth an afternoon's wanderings.

No matter how much equipment and money Peak Resorts dumps onto these trails, there's a natural charm to this mountain that will always shine through. And perhaps best of all, Crotched East remains *au naturel* for the foreseeable future. The local [backcountry](#) bums will still have a place to play.

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