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september 1999

At Killington, everything worth doing is worth overdoing.



OVER THE

BY **Bill Kerig**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **François Portmann**



LIMIT

Hard to the core: Killington locals Brad Leaborne (foreground), Mark English (middle) and Danny Hinden slash through the trees.

Below: Killington TV personality Marci Francis rips a tiny piece of the area's 1,000 acres. Center: The author engages in classic après-ski hijinks with Francis and her co-host, Annie Walsh, at the new Killington Grand Resort Hotel. Right: Eric Holmes nails Outer Limits, Killington's signature mogul run.



The maniac leaped across moguls like a hopped-up squirrel. His army-green helmet wobbled crazily, its strap disappearing beneath a wildly flapping gray beard.

Hucking mute grabs on Killington's steep and impossibly mogulled Outer Limits, 49-year-old Stephen Read was training for his first bump competition. "This place is about adventure," he told me when I questioned his sanity. "If it's not, what's the point?"

Which, as it turns out, is exactly the point of Killington.

I first visited the central-Vermont resort as a 12-year-old, riding in the back of Mom's Chevy. Throughout high school and college, I'd come in my Volkswagen, and in my 20s I drove a Pro Mogul Tour van from Colorado to Killington. It was on Outer Limits, in the heat of a pro-bump duel, that I tore my ACL. I still have the ESPN tape to remind me of the moment Killington beat me.

AS THE SWEAT COOLED ON MY BACK, MORE SHOTS WERE DRUNK WITH PEOPLE WHOSE NAMES I CAN'T REMEMBER.

So, it was with a preteen's excitement and a victim's vendetta that I turned onto Killington Road last March. It was a Tuesday, midday, and the road was empty. Four miles and three weather changes later—from sun to rain to snow—I pulled up to the Killington Grand Resort Hotel, a colossal fortress extending a wide porte cochere into the maelstrom. A spry valet hefted my luggage.

"Don't worry about the weather," he said with the cheerful acceptance of so many Vermonters. "It'll change in a minute." No doubt.

I checked in, dumped my gear, grabbed my skis, and headed out. I clomped across a long wooden bridge that was anchored in ice and headed for the chair in the now lightly falling snow. After a warmup run in slush the consistency of a Slurpee, I opted for Superstar.

Superstar draws up steeply from the road, its wide, benched drop-offs forming a massive stage under the chair's captive audience. It screams "show off." My adolescent memories of Superstar held gauntlets of gapers, yard sales, and snow guns; just surviving it



bestowed major Monday-morning bragging rights in junior high.

But on this day, its expanse was vacant. I shoved into it, my skis rolling like coasters on ball bearings. I took it in one GS-turning, thigh-burning plunge. This wasn't some lame, dinky East Coast run; this was a full-on blast. It wasn't till the bottom that I realized this was the first time I'd ever had Superstar all to myself. Killington was already toying with my expectations.

Killington TV morning-show hosts Marci Francis and Annie Walsh bantered animatedly in front of a wall-sized trail map. Through an hour of silly segues, weather reports, and ski-school promos, their obvious pride in Killington seemed more than a performance for a paycheck. Under the guise of a magazine writer who wanted a locals' take, and not as a lonely guy looking to meet two beautiful women, I called the station and asked to ski with them.

Walsh, a tall redhead with a face full of freckles and a spontaneous grin, met me at the base of the K1 gondola. I spotted wild-bearded Stephen Read, the 49-year-old-bumper, and invited him to join Walsh, photographer François Portmann, and me. He looked like the sort who would keep the PR talk honest. Read then filled the six-minute ride by describing his home mountain with a torrent of superlatives that would put a PR flack to shame.

But hey, there's a lot to describe. Spread across seven mountain peaks, Killington stretches for 11 miles and has

six bases. It's a fat hill. If you don't pay attention, you can end your day several miles from where you began.

"You're going mountain to mountain, conditions changing every minute, not sure what's over the next ridge," said Read. "It's the kind of feel you get in big resorts like Whistler."

True, but that transmountain experience can also turn into a ski day spent on cat-road traverses. The way to avoid this is glaringly obvious: Just follow the simple plan printed right on the trail map. I figured any plan that obvious would land me amid huge crowds, particularly on weekends. I was wrong.

The plan is this: Start with the rising sun at bump heaven, Bear Mountain. Its signature run, Outer Limits, is often partially groomed, making it a good place to warm up. About 10 o'clock, it's time to head for the Skyship gondola and the Superstar quad. Then, take the new K1 gondola to the top of Killington Peak and work your way over to the Canyon quad, then make a run or two on the Snowdon quad. Stop in The Peak for lunch. Eat slowly if it's a weekend because there's no escaping the crowd now. Then, with a full belly, leisurely work back to Bear Mountain, where the hordes have worn themselves out, and end the day with a flourish.

Walsh, however, had her own plan. From the top of K1, she led our group to a classic run called Cascade. The access route was lined with rime-covered pines, flag-formed by the Arctic blasts that pummel the summit. We passed by vertical sheets of ice draping a granite

buttress. True to form, on this day the wind was biting, with snow devils swirling up the slope's steep swath, and I could hear every turn on the hard groomed snow as I arced up to speed. I carved for the edges, seeking (and finding) softer snow there. Trees blurred by, a reminder that this was not a wide, interstate-like Western groomer, and inspired a "what if?" fear. Cascade's pitch and proximity to trees make a good argument for helmets. Which is just as it should be; Killington is no place for fools.

After a few more similar charges, we headed eastward, away from the wind and toward Bear Mountain. "It's 20 degrees warmer on this side," Walsh said. "It has its own weather pattern." If I hadn't felt it, I wouldn't have believed how much difference a couple of miles could make.

Despite the warming temperatures, Outer Limits was still riddled with the ugliest, granite-hard bumps I'd run into all season. No wonder this run



has graduated so many world-class bumpers—Donna Weinbrecht, Steve Desovich, Chuck Martin, Bob Aldighieri. This stellar reputation, however, has made skiing O.L. a feat worthy of après-ski bragging rights, not unlike the cachet of Superstar in my junior high days. Halfway down, I stood and watched with amusement as a seemingly endless stream of skiers flung themselves into the bumps. The carnage was marvelous.

But this was also the run that had bested me years ago. I turned into a deep rut line to extract some revenge. I drove my tips, trying for all I was worth to keep my skis on the icy snow and dominate the hill. No dice: My skis slapped like a steel pacemaker in a crack addict. I pounded down until there were bumps no more.

"Nice run," said a liftie as I skied past.

"Thanks," I said, trying to force my pained wince into a smile. My heels throbbed. Outer Limits had bested me again.

OUTER LIMITS WAS RIDDLED WITH THE UGLIEST, GRANITE-HARD BUMPS I'D RUN INTO ALL SEASON.

The theme from *Rocky* blared over the speakers at the Wobbly Barn nightclub. An announcer's voice boomed: "From Las Vegas, Nevada, Harvey and the Wallbangers!"

Four dark-haired men in silk suits and platform-soled Hush Puppies took the stage. The lead singer, a young Dean Martin look-alike, jumped into the air and threw his legs skyward into a split that would make a gymnast wince.

"They say they're from Vegas," whispered Killington local Amy Phalon, "but I think they're really from New Jersey."

Origins notwithstanding, Harvey and the Wallbangers launched into a medley of Stray Cats, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, and Big Audio Dynamite that vibrated the balcony where we stood.

The Wobbly Barn, the epicenter of Killington nightlife, was rising to a Saturday-night frenzy. From flannel to silk, diamond earrings to nose studs, patchouli to Chanel, the crowd spanned economic and social boundaries. All were united by a maniacal zeal to make this night (and every Saturday night) come alive.

DESTINATION: KILLINGTON, VERMONT



VITAL STATS

TOP ELEVATION: 4,241 feet
VERTICAL DROP: 3,150 feet
ANNUAL SNOWFALL: 250 inches
SKIABLE ACREAGE: 1,200
TERRAIN: 36% ● 32% ■ 32% ◆
LIFTS: 3 gondolas, 12 quads, 6 triples, 5 doubles, 8 surface lifts
INFORMATION AND RESERVATIONS:
800-621-MTNS
SNOW REPORT: 800-422-3261
WEBSITE: www.killington.com

GETTING THERE: Killington is located in central Vermont, between the junction of U.S. Route 4 and Vermont Route 100, 11 miles east of Rutland. It's a three-hour drive from Boston, four from Montreal or Hartford, and five from New York.

PRICES: Full-day lift ticket, \$56 adult, \$36 children (ages 6–12) and seniors (over 65). Two-day adult ticket, \$102; five-day midweek pass, \$225.

LODGING: Killington and its environs are littered with condominiums, chalets, hotels, and lodges, as well as country inns, bed-and-breakfasts, and motor inns. There are only a few true ski-in/ski-out accommodations at Killington; many lodgings are along the four-mile stretch of Killington Road or Routes 4 and 100. Prices and styles run the gamut. The Killington Grand Resort Hotel, the mountainside condo-hotel where Bill Kerig stayed, offers restaurants, ballrooms, pools, hot tubs, cafes, and a health club. The Ski-House Hotline (800-446-1214) can help you and your pals find a house or shares in one.

FOOD, DRINK, & ENTERTAINMENT: Killington is richly famous for its nightlife. The Wobbly Barn is the premier steakhouse, bar, and dance hall. The Nightspot offers live acoustic-guitar performances seven days a week and brick-oven pizzas in The Outback, located in back. The Pickle Barrel draws a younger crowd with hipper music; the Grist Mill, a slightly older bunch. All of the above are routinely packed to the rafters. Mother Shapiro's is quieter; it serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner and is open until 3 A.M. on weekends. Epicures should take in Hemingway's, located in an old farmhouse on Route 4.

From my perch in the U-shaped balcony that overlooked the stage and dance floor, I used a \$20 tip to secure prompt service from the waitress. I drank my courage in Guinness and Jägermeister as the dance floor filled. I was determined to be a part of this madness, but I wasn't going in sober.

Under a sign reading NO MOSHING ON THE DANCE FLOOR, a portly man in his mid 40s wearing a T-shirt that read FUCT did a vicious twisting number, as if he were the *Caddyshack* gopher on crystal meth. A pregnant woman in a denim frock and skyscraper hair whirled and cavorted with shocking élan. A weight lifter in a ribbed, white T-shirt, black pants that fit like tights, and cowboy boots clapped, stomped, and pelvic-thrusted to Cake's "Going the Distance." He maintained ample room on the sardine-packed dance floor.

When I saw Marci Francis and a tall, stunning blond friend join the melee, I knew my time had come. Francis' friend Val had a knack for clearing space by whipping her golden hair with frenetic energy. Working in the orbit of her locks, I gave over to the pulsing rhythms of the Wallbangers.

Sometime after midnight Val's hair-tossing lost its effectiveness. The horde closed in, and its sweaty, heaving mass pressed us together so tightly we could have had simultaneous grand mal seizures and no one would have known until last call. It was only when the Wallbangers' last strains dissolved in the smoky air that we peeled apart.

Then, as the sweat cooled on my

back, more shots were drunk with people whose names I can't remember now, if I ever knew them at all. The lights came up, and we were shoved into the final stage of nocturnal ritual. For many, this was the moment when their actions would mark the night as failure or success. Numbers were jotted on cocktail napkins, sweaty kisses were exchanged, strangers reached out with alcohol-emboldened arms for other strangers.

Despite the bright lights, my memory is dim. There was talk of a Jacuzzi and an after-hours party, and for a fleeting moment, I thought the revelry would go on and on. Alas, as the bouncer shouted, "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here," talk of Jacuzzis drained away. Someone uttered those dreaded three letters, "DUI," and it was all over. Sanity and responsibility returned. Car keys were handed off, more sober drivers found. Next thing I knew, I was alone in a spinning bed in the Grand. Like its daytime counterpart, O.L., the Wobbly had left me humbled.

Boarding a chairlift in the cold Vermont sunshine is a fine salve for a hangover. By the time I got to the top of the Canyons chair on Killington Peak, the blue throb behind my eyes was bearable.

I dropped into Big Dipper, a steep gladed run of unlikely drop-offs and must-make turns on slick, hard snow. I was hating it, but necessity rattled my limbs to life, and by the time I got to the Glade chair, I had completed the transition from partier to skier.



Saturday nights at The Wobbly Barn, epicenter of Killington nightlife, rise to a frenzy of activity rarely seen outside the Big Apple.



Throughout the week at Killington, I discovered this was a transition that many didn't bother to make. In search of a locals' on-mountain haunt, I skied to the west side of the Glades chair and spotted a well-used trail that led under a rope and through the woods. A sign read: SKI AREA BOUNDARY. DANGEROUS AND DESOLATE TERRAIN ARE BEYOND THIS POINT. NO RESCUE SERVICE OR FIRST AID PROVIDED. YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN AND SHOULD BE PREPARED TO SPEND THE NIGHT IN THE WOODS.

I proceeded anyway, ducking tree limbs and hooking sharply around tight corners until the trail opened up at Coopers Cabin, an old bunk house originally built as a shelter for Appalachian Trail hikers. Sixteen pairs of skis and snowboards rested outside the cabin.

"C'mon in," said a voice from the semidarkness of the windowless hut. My eyes registered vague shapes of heads with goggles pushed up on their crowns. The air was thick with pungent smoke.

"You holdin'?" someone asked.

"Only my breath," I said. Declining invitations to join in—getting stoned isn't my thing—I headed back to the ski area.

Bushwhacking had made me ravenous, so I skied over to Raul's Burritos. A

"THIS PLACE IS ABOUT ADVENTURE. IF IT'S NOT, WHAT'S THE POINT?"

funky, multicolored shack at the midway station of the Skyeship, Raul's looks like it belongs in Venice Beach. "Dancing Queen" blared and 50 people head-bobbed, stuffing burritos into their faces. It looked like a hip scene, but I didn't have the energy for it. I just wanted to eat a burger and chill.

So I cruised over to Bear Mountain, where Bobby Dick and the Sundowners were jamming a Grateful Dead standard on the sun-soaked deck. Long grills sizzled meat and the air smelled of charred, buttery fat. Bottles of beer as big as tenpins covered the picnic tables. Large men in Boston Bruins jerseys, New York Giants jackets, and several in white singlets guzzled, sang, and smoked cigars. The deck had a tailgate-party vibe. This would work.

A waitress in a blouse adorned with hot chilis, a nylon miniskirt, and platform shoes sailed a tray loaded with 24-ounce beers above the throng. She plunked a bomber in front of a petite woman with jet-black hair held high in a bun and diamond earrings big as nickels. Her nails were painted lilac. She took the bottle in both her tiny hands and chugged a quarter of it. This deck, like the terrain above, was not for shrinking violets. I got my burger and settled into the good-time crowd.

When the sun slid below the trees, I caught the last chair out of Bear, riding up and over runs that had begun the day baby-bottom smooth but were now rashed with thigh-high moguls. Taking my last whirl around the mountain, I felt a strange satisfaction. Skiing here is a head-on challenge you take on the chin and feel in your bones. For all its snowmaking and grooming, Killington still feels raw, untamed, undiluted. In a week I'd skied through Slurpees, gales, cement, and sun; battled demons and desires; endured heartbreak and hang-over. Never once did I worry about my taxes, the entropy of my automobile, or my total lack of retirement planning.

Now that's a vacation. ◀