



Story by Alessandra Bianchi
Photos by Jigger Herman

Hut Sweet Hut

Every winter weekend, a family makes the trek from the suburbs to the sublime.

“Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother’s hut we go.”

IT’S NOT how the traditional lyrics were written, but then again, our winter routine is anything but traditional. It goes something like this:

Every Friday night, from early December until mid-April, our family of four begins its own version of a bizarre hybrid reality TV show. Our task is to transport the main characters—a 40-something mom and dad and our two sons, ages 9 and 11—plus all of the food, clothing and ski gear required for a weekend, into a hut in the woods. Our weekly feat combines the breathlessness of *The Amazing Race*, some physical hardship like that of *Survivor*, and a touch of *Martha Stewart Living*.

The journey, from suburban Boston to the Mad River Valley, is approximately 200 miles, and given the capricious New England weather, not to mention weekend warrior traffic, the trip can take as long as six hours. After years of practice, we’ve got feeding the boys dinner, packing and loading the car down to under an hour. We’ve made good use of our drive time by borrowing from our library every conceivable book on tape that even remotely appeals to our mixed-aged audience. We’re also on a first-name basis with the operators of most, if not all, of the bathroom/snack/fuel opportunities off Interstate 89.

And once we’ve conquered the drive, then the real fun begins. Given the quirkiness of our destination—a 20-by-20 foot Scandinavian-carved wooden hut in the woods—we never quite know what we’ll find. Although we’re close to a modern ski area and its many amenities, if the snow is deep and our “drive-way” hasn’t been plowed, we have to hike in on foot. When this occurs on a Saturday morning, it can be challeng-



The hut arrived in a kit from Norway in the 1970s.

ing in a charming “Sound of Music” sort of way, but on a Friday night at 11 p.m., with two sleepy children and temperatures in the single digits, it is quite a different story (see *Survivor*, above).

Whether we hike or drive to the hut, we then have to lug everything in, fire up the generator, and wait for the forced hot air to overcome a week’s worth of deep-winter freeze. Given that it takes six hours for the hut to heat up, we’re really good at going to bed in hats, gloves and enough layers to make a grandma proud. And our boys think nothing of brushing their teeth with a jug of water, since the water in the drained taps also takes its time thawing and returning. Our record low temperature outside the hut is 22 below; inside, the record low at bedtime was two degrees.

I should add that before jumping

into bed, a few chores remain. The beds need to be made: sheets, quilts and pillows fetched from giant Tupperwares stacked high to the ceiling. As toilsome as this can be, it is preferable to the alternative, which can be finding a mouse, mouse poop or shredded bedding in your bed. We learned the hard way not to leave anything in the hut during the week that might pique a mouse’s curiosity, for they are truly among God’s most curious of creatures.

Many years ago, from the smell of things, we’re convinced a few of the little guys had a sauna inside the oven’s interior insulation. Every time we turn on the oven (which is now never), we smell their legacy. Today, the oven still sits there, unused but occupying center stage, like a precious family heirloom. No matter. We make do just fine with



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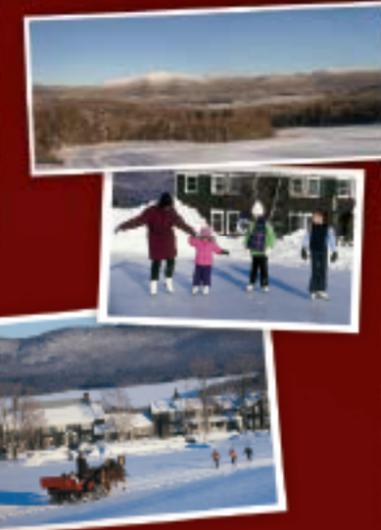
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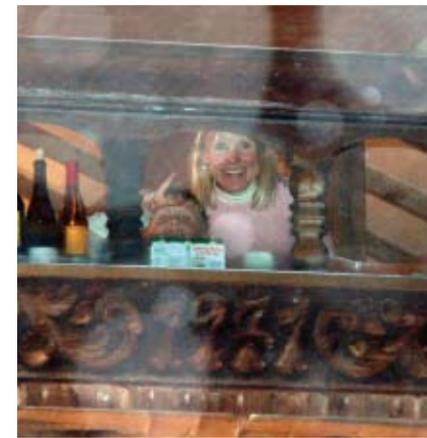


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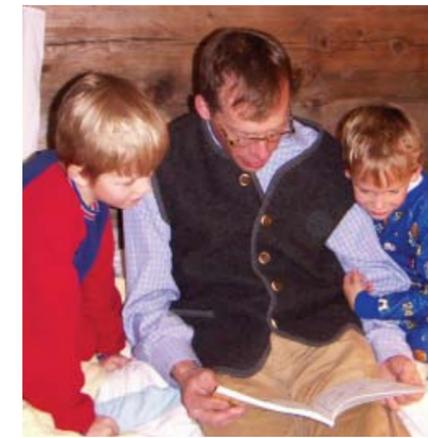
Peering out the window in a snowstorm.

four gas burners, a tiny toaster oven, and a weekly campfire. When planning meals, especially for company, it's actually sort of a fun puzzle figuring out what will work or not in the hut. Skillet dinners and butterflied lamb—marinated and partially baked at home, stuffed into a Ziploc bag, and then finished over the campfire—have been big hits. Take that, Martha Stewart!

A few other tricks we've learned over the years: scented candles mask sulfur-smelling well-water and other "funny" hut odors surprisingly well, and the sight of a bouquet of tulips inside an otherwise rustic space is well worth the trouble of wedging them into the back of a precariously packed car. A Dust Buster is the easiest way to vacuum up mouse poop without getting too grossed out; and though humans may disagree, mice consider toilet paper and newspapers a food group.

BUT THESE TRICKS of the trade pale in significance to the most valuable lesson hut living has taught me. Cliché as it sounds, the family time we spend within and outside its wooden walls each weekend is worth any logistical obstacles the hut might throw our way. In our 21st-century, global-warming, high-tech, disposable society, there's something refreshing, foreign and almost medicinal about the hut. The hoops we jump through make us appreciate all of the good things the hut has to offer all the more.

And these abound. In addition to skiing all day, there are family campfires, snowshoe treks through the woods and night forays with headlamps to look forward to *après ski*. Hut living has also taught our boys skills they might not necessarily have acquired in the comfort



Sharing a book at bedtime.

of our suburban home, or even in a ski condo: how to properly split wood, for instance, or shoot a bow and arrow, or drain pipes and fill a toilet bowl with just the right amount of anti-freeze when we leave each Sunday night. Surely these are more valuable ways to forge a boyhood than hanging out at the mall?

For our family in particular, hut living is also a way to connect with family heritage. These are the exact same woods my husband grew up in. His mother is Norwegian, and the hut was a birthday gift that arrived in a kit from Norway in the early 1970s. It is modeled after Scandinavian *hutte*s, the 14th-century log cabins used to store hay and provide shelter for shepherds moving their livestock to summer pastures. An authentic *hutte*, the Vastveit Storehouse, can be seen today in Stockholm, at Skansen, the oldest open-air museum in the world. A few summers ago, the boys and I happened to stumble across it while we were in Sweden for a wedding. "Look, mom, it's the hut!" they observed with pride and pleasure.

When my mother-in-law received her unusual present from my father-in-law, they were in the midst of launching and running the Sugarbush Inn. The surprise gift would become a warming hut for cross-country skiers for the next 15 years. After they sold the inn, my brother-in-law, along with a crew, moved the hut to its present location and added welcome amenities, like a shower, toilet and generator-supplied power. At the time, I'm not sure anyone realized it was destined to become one of the most unusual family ski houses in Vermont.

Whenever I'm tempted to complain about the rigors of hut living, I think of two things. First, the front stone stoop of the hut was the scene of my husband's



The Saturday-night bonfire.

and my first kiss. Even when I'm griping because I can see my breath indoors, this memory brings a smile to my lips. Secondly, this year the boys, independently and unprompted, both chose the hut as subject matter for school projects. When asked to compose a poem about something personally meaningful, our third-grader wrote an ode called, "Skiing," with lines like the following:

*I feel the wind on my nose and mouth
It feels magical to be sliding down a ski trail on my skis...I am sad to leave.
But I know I'll be coming back next weekend.*

Our fifth-grader was asked to write an essay on a "special place." He entitled his, "Our Vermont Fire Pit," and his singular connection with this little patch of Vermont earth speaks eloquent volumes about why we make the effort to visit the hut each weekend:

It is a cold, dark night in Vermont. The temperature is a brisk 10 degrees Fahrenheit. Suddenly you hear a crackling and you come to the welcoming heat and light of a roaring campfire... The radiant heat coming off of the fire is rain in a desert... We go up to Vermont every weekend in the winter to ski, and we have a fire every Saturday night. It's a very long drive to get there, but it's worth the drive when you're there.

I've been a journalist for 20 years. But my two sons capture in writing what is best about our routine better than I ever could. Clearly, hut living suits them. And their father and me. ▀

Alessandra Bianchi writes about lifestyle and entrepreneurship from Marblehead, Massachusetts.