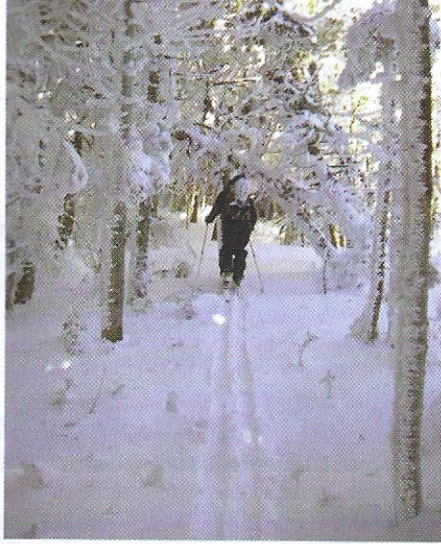


Earning Our Turns

*Celebrating romance Nordic
style on Vermont's Long Trail*

Story and photos by
Alessandra Bianchi

Winter brings many challenges, among them finding places to ski in relative solitude. Among forests in the Northeast Kingdom (as with this view) and along Vermont's famous Long Trail, opportunities for cross-country skiing in quiet abound. (Photo by Steve Legge, Image North Photography)



Although well marked, during winter the trail markings may not be so obvious. Two-way radios, GPS, and cell phones are a must-have for safety's sake on any skiing expeditions here. Laden with all this gadgetry, Alessandra's husband nonetheless forges ahead on the trail.



Alessandra says she and her husband agree with ski pioneer Fridtjof Nansen, who opined: "It is better to go skiing and think of God than to go to church and think of sport."

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd find walking uphill on skis in subzero temperatures romantic, but stranger things have befallen people who marry Scandinavians.

Nearly every weekend, between December and April, I huff and puff my way along a raggedy ribbon of snow covering the spine of Vermont's Green Mountains, struggling after my husband as he deftly makes his way up, down, and around the trail's plentiful snowdrifts. We wear telemark skis equipped with sticky skins on their bottoms that enable us to almost defy gravity and walk "up" the giant white mounds, but for those of us who weren't born on these free-heeled precursors to their downhill cousins, it's tricky going.

Whereas my husband elegantly glides and executes quick jump turns, my so-called "progress" along the trail is a messier, stickier affair. Often I find myself teetering like a cartoon figure, suspended midair on skis stuck between two massive snowdrifts, at a loss whether to go forward or back. Seeking purchase, I jam my poles into anything within reach but it's like trying to get a grip in peaked, whipped egg whites.

Except these egg whites aren't the fluffy, white, innocuous kind. They are crunchy and glacial, more porous than a snow cone, but still containing unexpectedly sharp shards that will cut your cheek if you happen to face-plant on them (trust me on this).

Some spouses take up bowling or bridge. Some become obsessed with golf, or morph into rabid football fans.

In the name of quality time, fun, and yes, romance, with my husband, I have become more familiar with the twists and turns of a heavily wooded stretch of wilderness known as the Long Trail than I ever dreamed possible.

"The Long Trail is steep in some places, muddy in others, and rugged in most," cheerfully explains the FAQ section on the trail's website. And that's during summer. In winter, temperatures usually don't budge from the single digits, and subzero howling winds constantly shift the snowdrifts and alter the warp and woof of the winding path. Even though it has been there for nearly a century, the Long Trail is frighteningly easy to lose, in other words. For this reason, not to mention the fact that he hasn't met a techie gadget he doesn't love, on our outings, my husband looks less like his Nordic ancestors and more like an exhibitor at the Consumer Electronics Show.

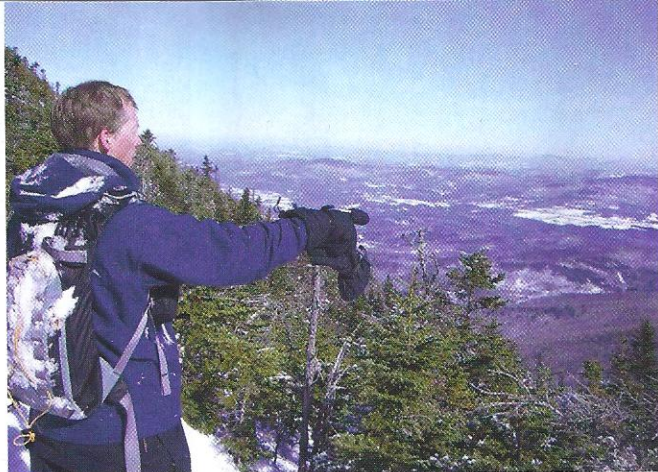
In addition to sporting the requisite two-way radio and cell phone (hey, we're parents from suburbia, not mountaineers on the order of Jon Krakauer), and built-in defogging fan inside his goggles, my husband velcros a small, raised black square to the strap of his hydration backpack. For months, I assumed it was part of his fancy backpack—a space-age Advil® storage capsule, say—but one day he set me straight. It's a small antenna, which purportedly improves the reception of the GPS device dangling from his neck, thus precisely confirming or contradicting our location down to the coordinate.

Alas, the early 20th-century

footpath still defies the best 21st-century navigational technology, not to mention the considerable computational firepower of my husband, an MIT-educated engineer, who likes to pore over digital topographical maps for fun. Invariably, during our treks, like a seasoned platoon leader silently motioning his troops, he asks me to hold up the antenna while he takes GPS readings and exploratory forays—checking and double-checking that we are, indeed, on course.

Admittedly, I am grateful for these pauses, for they give me much-needed time for life's necessities: personal grooming (adjust and try not to be discouraged by helmet hairdo, reapply chapstick); hygiene (nose-blowing, cyclist style); goggle fog clearing (sleeve powered, not automated—alas); bathroom breaks (note to self: ditch suspenders on ski pants the next time); and venting or unventing of breathable performance gear (all that crouching and scooting can be sweaty business, and you want moisture to "wick" away instead of freezing into crusty, chafing nastiness). For this last task I use my jacket's armpit vents, but my husband, when trail-breaking, generates enough excess heat that he usually unzips the side flaps on his pants, affording more than a passing glimpse of his Calvin Klein tightie whities. When the going gets tough, I amuse myself trying to spot that glimpse of white between pine tree switchbacks, like an underwear version of *Where's Waldo*.

I almost forgot to mention the most vital activity afforded by my husband's



Up on the mountaintops, if one can endure the bitter cold and keep from getting blinded by sunlight and reflected glare...well, there's a lot of Vermont to see and reflect on, even when you're above the cloud line.

It's rigorous, certainly, but on still days when we are surrounded by pristine, quiet whiteness, it's also peaceful, magical, and nearly religious.

scouting breaks: stuffing my chafed and wind-burnt face. Whereas he is Mr. Endurance and can last all day on a morning croissant and coffee, in the woods, I am more like a hummingbird, requiring constant calorie replenishment. Finding energizing food that not only tastes good but fits easily into pockets and doesn't break my crowned teeth when frozen has been a culinary challenge I have spent seasons perfecting. Dried apricots, cranberries, and almonds are my usual standbys. For bigger treks, I slip a cream cheese and cucumber sandwich into my chest pocket. Dessert is crystallized ginger—whose zing I welcome when I freeze or flag.

Drinking remains an issue. I chipped a tooth biting down on the mouthpiece of my husband's hydration pack, and on really cold days the water in its tubing lines freezes anyway. I've worn a water bottle in a holster around my waist, but often the lid freezes shut. A ski coach recently gave me some advice: As long as you have a non-leaky bottle, stick it in your pack or wear it in your holster upside-down. You may end up with a layer of frozen ice on top but at least your lid won't be frozen shut. Something to aspire to.

To show off, I've made this sound fairly arduous, but that is misleading. Gripping aside, after years of practice I have grown to appreciate and cherish these Long Trail outings, for they are some of the most quality times I spend with my husband. If I have to suit up in Arctic gear, freeze to death, and get avalanched by dumping snow as I squeeze

my way through a rabbit-size opening that my husband assures me is a ski run, then so be it. In sickness and in health, in Gore-Tex® and stuck in tree wells. All in the name of Happily Ever After.

It's rigorous, certainly, but on still days when we are surrounded by pristine, quiet whiteness, it's also peaceful, magical, and nearly religious. On a frigid Sunday morning, when the sun streams through a hushed cathedral of trees, my husband and I completely agree with Fridtjof Nansen, the 19th-century Norwegian ski pioneer who opined, "It is better to go skiing and think of God than to go to church and think of sport."

In addition to their spiritual aspect, our winter "walks" are also surprisingly romantic. My husband grew up in these very woods, and when in them he sheds his middle-age husband/father/employer cares and becomes the boy he once was. He is bubbly, enthusiastic, wide-eyed, adventurous, and cheerful as he shuffles, scooches, and schusses along the trail. This reminds me of how he was when I fell in love with him, which, in turn, reminds me of how I was—all of which brings back those dewy-eyed, uncertain, and exhilarating times.

Which is not to say that after 17 years of marriage the quality of our relationship has gone downhill, so to speak. On the contrary, I like to think it is strengthened: two children, two cats, two companies, two hernias, three dental surgeries, four moves, several non-life-threatening illnesses, and countless triumphs and disappointments

later, we're still here after all. Rather, it's just very pleasant and satisfying to be reminded of those special, less cluttered times on a weekly basis—particularly when our Monday through Friday identities keep us distracted and operating at warp speed. If the price of that enjoyment is a frozen expedition, I am more than willing to pay it.

In fact, the scarcity of this special time together, not to mention the heroic lengths we go to experience it, only heighten our enjoyment. On those occasions when I succeed in extracting a swig of water from my rapidly freezing water bottle, I am reminded of the lines in *The Little Prince*, where de Saint-Exupéry's thirsty narrator describes how circumstances can transform a mere drink of water into the sublime: "He drank, eyes closed. It was as sweet as a feast. That water was more than merely a drink. It was born of our walk beneath the stars, of the song of the pulley, of the effort of my arms. It did the heart good, like a present."

Our outings along the Long Trail are nothing less than a present. To push an arboreal metaphor, whenever I lose sight of the husband/wife "forest," due to the obscuring effects of the children/pets/employees/in-laws/play-dates/teachers/coaches/colleagues "trees," my up close view of the Vermont woods brings everything into focus. I have my husband to thank for this. In telespeak, he has shown me the beauty of earning our turns. ▽

Alessandra Bianchi, a native southern Californian, lives in Marblehead, MA, and has been brainwashed by her husband into thinking that skiing on blue ice is fun.