

Escapes

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SKI REPORT

Sugarbush Tries to Regain Its Buzz

By BILL PENNINGTON

THERE once was a mountain they called the Aspen of the East. It had boundless terrain, lavish dining, a pulsing nightlife and a clientele of gossip-page celebrities. Every Friday evening in winter, a chartered Greyhound bus called the Sugarbush Special would pull away from Park Avenue and the onboard party would be rocking by the time the bus rolled out of Manhattan.

Unfortunately, for those of us who missed it, that was 1962.

There were so many jet-set models, Kennedy offspring and New York designers regularly making their way to central Vermont in those days that Sugarbush earned the nickname Mascara Mountain. The Sugarbush vibe, spurred by a great and varied skiing experience, hung on into the 1980s, and then, Sugarbush subtly fell off the radar.

The children of the Mascara Mountain generation flocked to other ski areas. If some remembered to try Sugarbush, not many repeated the trip.

"People who came back loved the mountain and hated the lodging," Win Smith, one of Sugarbush's current owners, said last month. "They were staying in a condo that still had a shag rug from the 1970s."

When Sugarbush did market research it asked skiers and riders what they thought of the resort, and some would answer: "Sugarbush? Is that still open?" Others would say, "That's my favorite mountain. But I haven't been there in 20 years."

After 30 years of fits and starts and failed projects to refurbish the legendary area, Sugarbush, in Warren, Vt., finally has something new to go with its storied past. It is the biggest capital project to be completed at a Vermont resort this season. It will replace the shag rugs.

The \$60 million Clay Brook Residences and Gate House Lodge opened at the base of Sugarbush's Lincoln Peak in mid-December, replacing the antiquated hodge-podge of squat buildings that had inadequately served the area for



SANDY MACYS/SUGARBUSH RESORT

FOR APRES-SKI TO EAT *The new projects at Sugarbush include a restaurant and bar, Timbers, which is adjacent to the hotel and lodge.*

too long. Clay Brook, a condo hotel with 61 units that sleep more than 400, happily transforms the entire look and feel of the skiing and riding experience at Sugarbush.

Hoping to bring back the days of models and jetsetters on the slopes.

Designed to look like a large red Vermont barn and featuring an enlarged silver silo, Clay Brook gives Sugarbush the luxury slopeside lodging it sorely lacked. The Gate House is a two-story base lodge with a large, upscale cafeteria eating area, a pub and other services.

Sugarbush desperately needed the infusion of condo/hotel space because real estate values in the area had grown so depressed that locals and second-home buyers were snatching up what had been seasonal rental condos — sometimes for as little as \$60,000 — and turning them into year-round residences.

Originally, Mr. Smith and his partners planned a larger, Western-style, \$90 million lodge and spa. Financing for that deal fell through in mid-2004. Five years earlier, the plans of the American Skiing Company, owner of Sugarbush in the late 1990s, for a grand lodge were derailed by local protests and delays in the permitting process.

The third attempt, by Mr. Smith and associates, brought about a retooled and scaled-down project. The good news is there's finally something that feels like a home base for Sugarbush's 111 trails and spectacular 2,600 vertical feet. All but 10 whole-ownership residences



SANDY MACYS/SUGARBUSH RESORT

NEW PROJECT *Gate House Lodge is part of upgrades at Sugarbush.*

have sold. Of those remaining, a two-bedroom is selling for \$485,000 and a five-bedroom suite is \$1.4 million. Fractional opportunities still exist and start at \$125,000.

The new development at Sugarbush also includes a 130-seat restaurant and bar, Timbers, which is adjacent to the hotel and lodge and serves an appealing menu of dishes prepared almost exclusively with Vermont products. But the unquestioned culinary star of the area, and perhaps in all of Vermont, is a few miles away at the Pitcher Inn in the

snug and tidy village of Warren.

The Pitcher Inn has 11 rooms and suites, a first-floor restaurant and a welcoming pub, lounge and game room in the basement. The restaurant is a must visit with a menu of brilliantly prepared delights, from an intriguing roasted squab appetizer to the luscious Wellfleet oyster stew to the juicy braised lamb shank.

A meal like that may not make you feel light and free on the slopes the next morning, but go easy on breakfast and you can work it off. Like the rest of the

East, Sugarbush is far from having typical winter snowfall this season. Fortunately, during the American Skiing Company days, a 25-million-gallon snowmaking pond was built as part of a vast snowmaking upgrade. Sugarbush will need it as temperatures turns cold again (although it is a little-known secret that until last week's rain, the skiing in Vermont was far better than the green grass outside your window would suggest).

Now, depending on where you are coming from, Sugarbush is about an hour farther into central Vermont than, say, Stratton, which makes it about a five-hour drive from New York. It is 45 minutes from Burlington International Airport. That's worth noting, because a lot of people, for some reason, believe Sugarbush is farther from New York than it is. But if you want to experience three peaks with every kind of skiing and riding in an uncluttered, noncorporate Vermont setting (Sugarbush has one-third the visitors annually of Killington), Sugarbush is worth the extra hour.

The Sugarbush Special doesn't run from Manhattan anymore. But then, no one refers to A-list celebrities as jet-setters anymore either. The best things are that the mountain hasn't changed, the lodging has, and a great snow playground is ready and waiting for you again. Mascara is optional.