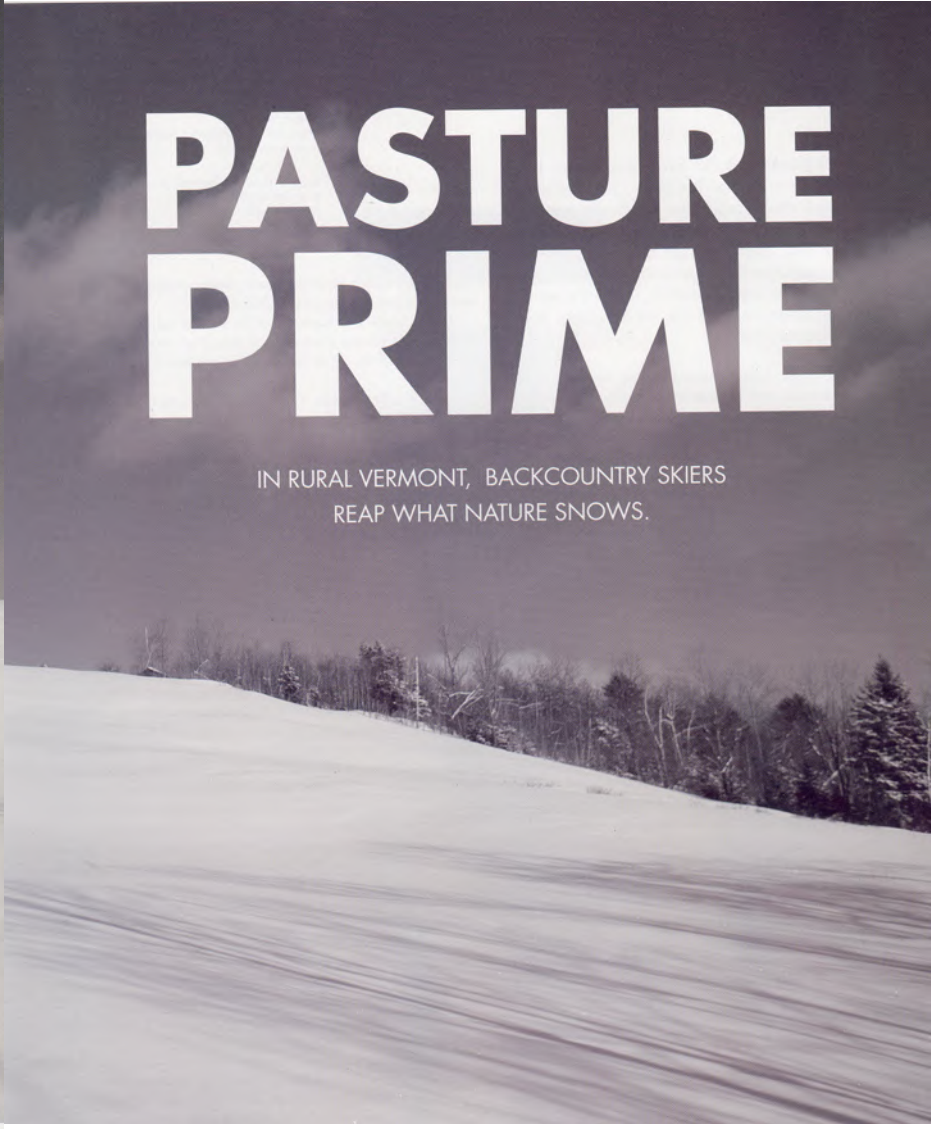




PASTURE PRIME

IN RURAL VERMONT, BACKCOUNTRY SKIERS
REAP WHAT NATURE SNOWS.



Winds: Kirk Kardashian
Images: Justin Cash

Most nights in Woodstock, Vt. are quiet. Route 4, the main east-west corridor in the state, plumbs a line straight through this quaint New England town, past an oval-shaped green and brick courthouse and a colonnaded town hall. The shops are mostly shuttered by 5:30, and you can cross the street without looking both ways. The one bar of any distinction, Bentley's, attracts a wine-sipping clientele, and the DUL-vigilant police keep things nice and civil.

Except on Friday nights during winter. From my house on a hill a hundred feet above the road I can hear the steady slither of SUVs winding west across town and astride the Ottauquechee River, to Okemo, Killington, and Pico. They come with roof racks full of skis glazed in grit and re-frozen road slush. They bear license plates from New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. The weekend warriors battle each other on the sinuous, snow-covered, two-lane roads and continue battling all weekend in packed parking lots, Byzantine lift lines, and overcrowded trails.

I've done that battle long enough to know what I'm missing. On busy weekends in January, the warriors go their way, and I go mine—as do others who seek solitude and fresh tracks on the state's 5.9 million acres of mountainous, snow-drifted, and mostly undeveloped land.

Given its rolling terrain, Vermont would be a backcountry skier's dream if not for one big problem (or, perhaps, millions of little problems): trees. They're everywhere, as far as the eye can see. Northern hardwoods, spruce, and fir sprout from the rocky soil like five-day growth on the faces of a hundred thousand sleeping giants. I have nothing against trees, but Vermont can be a stubborn wall of wood.

The first European settlers in Vermont were confounded by the thicket of deciduous and evergreen trees that blanketed the area in the mid 1700s. They eventually had their way with the trees, as well as the rest of the flora and fauna, by cutting, burning, and girdling them into submission. But it was nothing compared to the pasture-clearing frenzy that swept Vermont in the mid-1800s, when the wool industry was at its height. Sheep outnumbered people by as many as five to one. The remnants of that woolly heyday can be seen in the many-colored foliage in the fall, since the second and third growths produced a greater diversity of tree species. Hints of the sheep craze can also be spied in the many stone walls that run through the forests—forests that used to be green fields. The walls were built to fence in the sheep. Some pastures remain, either because gentleman farmers like the look of open fields, or because real farmers now graze dairy and beef cows on them.

On one such pasture in Woodstock, owned by farmer Clint Gilbert, the first ski tow in the United States was strung up in 1934. A Model-T engine powered the glove-eating rope about 200 vertical feet up the perfectly pitched slope. Bob Bourdon, a laid-back ski jumper and trumpet player, was the first one to make it to the top standing up. People parked cars along Route 12 for a half-mile,

Previous page • No speedy slither of out-of-state SUVs here. Just two skiers, a skin track, and an approving property owner.
Skiers: Kirk Kardashian, Poli Nightingale
Location: Pomfret, Vt.

Right • Gives "farming turns" a whole new meaning.
Skier: Poli Nightingale
Location: Pomfret, Vt.

eager to get a glimpse of the deadly contraption that launched an entire sporting industry in the United States.

Today, trams and high-speed lifts do the work of a thousand tows, yet the soulful stuff of local skiing still beckons, especially when blower pow—27 inches of it—falls in five days, with no wind to set it up.

I call my friend Justin Cash to see if he's up for a raid on the pastures. He's in, and brings our mutual buddy, Poli Nightingale. We drive north out of Woodstock three miles to the even smaller town of Pomfret, home to Suicide Six ski area and not much else. We bypass Suicide's full parking lot and its steep face and head up the winding dirt road, noting that other more visible pastures have already been skied.

"Vermont's tracked out!" Justin exclaims, showing a look of disbelief.

"Don't worry," I reply, hoping our gamble pays off. "Not many people know this hill exists."

Poli, who is piloting the truck, has no idea what he's in for and keeps quiet. After five minutes of driving, he parks in a turnout toward the top of the rolling mountain, and we begin skinning among maple saplings, breaking trail through two feet of effortless snow.

Like the majority of the land in Vermont, the spot we're skiing is privately owned. It's posted with the occasional yellow sign, prohibiting hunting and trapping. The owners of this particular plot are cool with non-motorized recreation, however, so we continue over an old logging road, crest a rise, and look through the trees across a small depression—with a perfect little pond and cedar-shake summer cottage—at our destination. It looms there, uninterrupted white in an otherwise forested horizon, untouched and waiting for us.

We ski down to the pond and over barbed wire and a stone wall nearly buried in snow. The aspect we're skiing is southwest, but temperatures are cold and the sun is merely a suggestion in the sky. Skimming up the final leg, we can tell the run is going to be special. We hug the tree line at skier's left and spoon each other's tracks. At about 30 degrees, the slope is steeper than most nearby pastures, and we pick up speed and porpoise in and out of the snow. The run's done in about 20 sweet powder turns, and we're back at the top in a matter of minutes. We log four runs, a whopping 1,000 vertical feet, but we leave with wide, sheepish grins, knowing we got the best turns in the county.

Later that month, we get another storm that spins out of the northeast as quickly as it sweeps in. Winds hammer most of the exposed faces at upper elevations. Still, Justin and I are hungry for more pastures, and, with 12-14 inches of new on the ground, I call a fixer in Tunbridge to see what he can whip up.



Below • Whoever named it the Green Mountain State must've been a summer resident.
Skier: Kirk Kardashian
Location: Tunbridge, Vt.



Right • Going for seconds.
Location: Pomfret, Vt.



Twenty miles north of Woodstock, Tunbridge is a hardscrabble hill town of loggers and multi-generational farmers. A web of steep dirt roads leads to a high, undulating plateau. On a clear day you can see Killington to the southwest and Mt. Moosilauke to the east. It's frigid and gusty when we meet our chaperone, Rob Caron. Rob and his friends have been skiing these hills for 30 years, first with three-pin bindings and leather boots, and now with the comfort and control of cables and plastic. Justin and I are over-gearred with our AT equipment, but as they say at the racetrack in nearby Barre, "You run what you bring."

Rob drives us up what feels like the highest public road for 10 miles, and we skin a little higher to a clearing with a 360-degree view. We take in fields, stands of evergreens, and drafty farmhouses with icicles and wood smoke. The wind chaps our faces and we scurry down to a more sheltered corridor of stolid birches, their paper bark shivering in the breeze. We traverse an open field and travel along a snowmobile trail that passes beneath the lonely gaze of a big, vacant luxury home.

After an hour of low-angled touring through a wind-shaped moonscape, we get to the goods: Tele Bowl, a wide-open pasture that funnels to a snow-covered creek. Across the mini valley is another pasture mirroring this one, and we spy a troop of four skiers skinning up along the tree line.

The snow in Tele Bowl resembles a slow-going Play-Doh. We cross through a bank of big, old maples that have shielded the slope from the wind, and the turns on that side are easier to come by. After a few laps we make our way back to the car. It's late afternoon and the long shadows of tree branches seem to hug the hills. With our tracks etched in the snow for these fleeting moments, it feels like we've hugged the hills, too. ❧