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Cold Mountain: Adirondack adventure First-time winter camper shares her experience

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March 21, 2008

It seemed like a good idea at the time. For my first foray into winter camping, we met up with friends who were doing their annual Adirondack ski trip.

My camping experience was negligible, and my backpacking experience consisted of a single night at Butler Lodge on Mount Mansfield. Granted that was a chilly night in early November, but this was late February with a serious snowpack. Growing up in New York City, my family's vacations had always taken place in the summer and involved cabins with electricity and running water. This was a brave new world, but I was willing to give it a try.

The pack weighed 28 pounds. I tip the scales at 124, so already I sensed a problem. The woman at the information center at Adirondack Loj said that the ski trail from Meadow Road to the campsite at Marcy Dam was only a moderate incline, "not so you'd notice." I noticed. My partner, Bryan Harrington, took off without difficulty, despite the fact that his older, but beloved external frame pack weighed considerably more than my newer model. He was chomping at the bit since we'd started out a day later than the others due to a forecast that called for temperatures of below 25 the previous night. He claimed the delay was due to the fact that his sleeping bag wasn't rated for such cold, but the truth is that he probably didn't want my first winter camping experience to be in such frigid weather. Smart guy, that Bryan.

So off we went, one day late. It was 9 below when we began the ski trek in. My pack was instantly miserably heavy, and I had to stop several times to unburden myself. Bryan never took his pack off. Did I mention that he's training for the Boston Marathon? The trail to Marcy Dam was 3.8 miles. It seemed like forever. I was huffing, puffing and aching in places I didn't realize could ache. Bryan never broke a sweat. Periodically, I allowed myself to briefly soak in the beauty of the trail with the snow-laden trees basking in the bright, blue sunlight. However, by the time Marcy Dam was within sight, I was convinced that I'd never put that pack on again. Don't they have Sherpas for this kind of thing?

Setting up camp took some time. We had to find the lean-to where Bryan's friends had spent that first frigid night, but eventually we found the tell-tale collection of sleds on which they'd trekked in their gear and food. We strung up our food bag between two trees and watched as a pine marten jumped expertly onto the bag within minutes. Oops. Wrong location. We removed the bag and added it to the existing collection that the guys -- all engineer-types -- had strung up, although it certainly seemed as though the marten could crawl across the heavier rope they had used if she wanted to. And after we left, she did. But thankfully she chose one of the other food bags. My M&M's stayed intact.

Having established camp, we took a snowshoe hike up to Indian Falls lookout. My mood began to improve as we headed up the trail, sadly realizing that we didn't have enough time to summit Mount Marcy. Life without the pack was much easier, and the snow-covered trail was a joy. Clouds were starting to roll in when we reached the viewpoint, but the vista of the surrounding mountains was stunning. My shoulders were starting to recover and the smile had returned to my face.

Returning to our base, we packed down the snow with our snowshoes to set up the tent. The temperatures were dropping, and I was unable to take my outer mittens off, rendering me fairly useless. I "supervised" and then

retreated into the lean-to to wait for supper. The arrival of the rest of the crew added some extra body heat, and I was able to briefly remove a mitten to eat, but not to cook; that was left to Bryan. We boiled some snow before retiring so that we could have hot water bottles at our feet. That and two pairs of socks, two pairs of pants, three shirts, one vest, a hat and glove liners.

The temperature dropped to the single digits that night, and the wind whipped through the tent, occasionally blowing snow up under the flaps and into my face. I burrowed deeper and deeper into the bag. We were woken by intermittent wind gusts, which might have been as high as 25 mph. Truth be told, I've had more comfortable nights, but I awoke in the morning with all fingers and toes intact.

We later learned that the one advantage to our tent is that we didn't have to share it with the marauding marten who tried several times to enter the lean-to with the guys. She was cute, they reported, but not that cute. Eventually they hung up a nightlight to convince her to find other premises. That seemed to work.

We awoke to several inches of fresh snow and a glorious day. We traded our snowshoes for nordic skis for a trip up to Avalanche Lake. Fresh snow made herringboning up the moderate incline (which includes a stretch known as Misery Hill) quite easy, and the view was glorious. We skied across the lake for lunch, admiring the ice floes, which formed on the ridges surrounding the frozen lake. I'm not particularly adept at skiing downhill on my skinny nordic skis, but the fresh snow made the descent a delight and all too short. Alas, we had a deadline and headed back to decamp. Again, my inability to take off my mittens for very long made helping difficult, but I was beginning to see the advantages of this limitation.

The return trek to the car was slightly downhill and having consumed M&M's and water, my pack was lighter. I only had to take it off twice. I believe I like winter camping. I'll have to try it again.

Phyl Newbeck is a freelance writer living in Jericho.