

BY JENNIFER HAZARD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HUBERT SCHRIEBL

Over the River & Through the Woods

Seeing Vermont
by Horse-Drawn Sleigh

On a bright and brisk afternoon, I take the family to Mountain View Ranch in Danby for a horse drawn sleigh ride. The giant red sleigh is really a wagon designed to look like a sled, but it's impressive. Ranch owners Jon and Letitia Sisters have decorated it with balsam wreaths and garlands. A small lantern at the head of the sleigh lights the way for night rides. And a team of draft horses is prepared to take us to a campfire for a round of s'mores and hot chocolate.

The experience is like something out of a holiday movie. My hus-

band, daughter and I are huddled together and tucked in with wool blankets. I'm tempted to sing "Over the River and Through the Woods," but maintain my composure for the sake of the other two couples on the ride. Instead, I take in the sweeping views of the mountains and watch as little cyclones of wind fly across the snowy valley.

Sleigh rides like this one are a popular outdoor activity during the winter months. Deb Hodis, who owns Horses for Hire in Rawsonville, says the sleigh-riding season begins in November and can last until early April (weather permitting, of course). Her clients range from local people to second homeowners and out-of-towners from all over the world.

Young or old, it seems everyone enjoys an old-fashioned sleigh ride through the woods, and Hodis aims to please right down to the last detail.

For riders looking for more of a challenge, there is the 22-mile experienced route, which goes out Route 100 past the Stratton Sun Bowl and toward the actual town of Stratton.

"It's very important to me for everything to look the way it used to years ago," she says. Her sleigh is adorned with 100 bells—hand cast by the Vermont Bell Company. And Hodis' team of horses wears a handmade leather harness dotted in brass.

The team itself is equally steeped in nostalgia. The breed, known as the Suffolk Punch, is rare (there are less than 1200 in all of North America).



She's fond of the horses for their reliability and willingness to work, as well as for their gentle demeanor.

Hodis' amiable team treats patrons to an unforgettable ride through the woods to the Winhall River. At this point in the journey, the horses will stop to rest while riders warm up by the campfire.

The picturesque spot is a popular choice for wedding proposals. Hodis will set up kerosene lamps, chairs and plenty of tissues near the fire. Then she'll step away to allow couples their privacy. "I tell them I have to go down and fix the trail, and wait until I hear tears of joy. It's one of my favorite parts of the job."

Enjoying the beauty of the Vermont woods behind the scenes is also part of the allure. Karl Pfister, who has offered horse drawn sleigh rides from his farm in Landgrove since 1981, says the experience allows travelers to see a part of the country that can't be reached by car. "Everyone sees America from their Chevrolet. Sleigh rides allow people to get off road a bit."

Rides leave from the Landgrove Inn and offer highlights of the Pfister family's 250-acre horse farm. From the farm, the sleigh ride continues through sections of the Green Mountain National forest.

Pfister especially enjoys the evening rides, when the night sky takes center stage. He says the view is particularly appealing to children who have never seen stars in a country setting. "Kids say 'this is just like being at a planetarium,' and I tell them they've got it backwards. A planetarium is just like this."

Similarly, Jonathan Wright of Taylor Farm in Londonderry offers sleigh rides that tour his dairy farm as well as several miles of wooded trails that provide views of Stratton, Bromley and Magic Mountains. He says



Jonathan Wright of Taylor Farm...and a friend

people enjoy the beauty of the ride, but are also intrigued by the farm itself. During the trip, he'll often field questions about the farming lifestyle, cheese making and the rising interest in local food. "We could go on for hours chatting," he says. "It makes the rides interesting for me, too. And people can tell I really like what I do."

No matter what farm you choose, most offer rides for large groups or reserve rides for couples or private parties during the day or evening. Many provide the opportunity to bring along picnic baskets, wine and even candles on trips. Deb Hodis of Horses for Hire says it's not uncommon for her customers to have elaborate dinner parties by the Winhall River.

If brisk outdoor meals don't appeal to you, Karl Pfister and the Landgrove Inn offer pre-dinner rides. He says eating beforehand is probably the best way to prepare for a nighttime

sleigh ride—well, that, and wearing warm layers.

Most sleigh rides last up to an hour and take a break mid-way for horses and riders alike. At Taylor

For more information on sleigh rides and pricing:

Mountain View Ranch, Danby
John and Letitia Sisters
293-5837
www.mountainviewranch.biz

Horses for Hire, Rawsonville
Deb Hodis
297-1468 or 380-2902
www.horsesforhire.net/sleigh.html

Pfister Farm, Landgrove
Karl Pfister
824-4663
www. Dover.net/~npfister/index.html

Taylor Farm, Londonderry
Jonathan Wright
824-5690
www.taylorfarmvermont.com

Farm, Jonathan Wright will cater to individual parties and allow them to linger a bit longer if requested. And regulars are often treated to new or expanded trails. “We have people who have come to us for 10-12 years now,” he says. “We do our best to keep the sleigh rides interesting for them.”

And whether you’re a seasoned rider or are considering going for the first time, remember to call early. Not surprisingly, the holidays are busiest for most farms. All recommend calling at least four weeks in advance to book your trip. You’ll be glad you did—there’s no better experience of winter than gliding across the snow with family and friends along for the ride.◇

Jennifer Hazard frequently contributes to STRATTON MAGAZINE.