



Feature Article

NUB'S NOB: HARBOR SPRINGS, MICHIGAN

By Jim and Ann Neff

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For the latest resort updates go to www.nubsnob.com.

Heading out of Detroit on a dark winter morning it takes blind faith to believe the best snow in the Midwest is five hours away. Going north on I-75 you pass Flint and Saginaw, factory smokestacks tinting everything gray. Three hours in, around Gaylord, the trees outnumber the people so you hang a left off the X-way. Up U.S.-131 and over the crest of the hill on the south side of Petoskey and the ski area across Little Traverse Bay is almost visible. Past the Bahnhof ski shop, left at the La Senorita restaurant and right at the sign with the big arrow. Into the driveway through a copse of trees and the great white wall that is the front side of Nub's Nob fills your windshield, sideline to sideline groomer grooves on black diamonds. Eyes narrow, a smile emerges. Faith rewarded. This is going to be good; you just know it.

It's a trek Grosse Pointers David and Jennifer DiLoreto and their four kids – Theresa, Danny, Tina, and Nicholas are happy to make almost every winter weekend. Even though they live “downstate,” the DiLoretos are season pass holders at Nub's for a basic reason. “Nub's has a unique atmosphere where everyone feels like they're a local,” says David DiLoreto. “You can come into the lodge and just plop your stuff down without worrying about someone taking it, and everyone keeps an eye on the kids; there aren't many places left like this. It's just like ‘Cheers,’ when you come here they remember your name,” he adds.

Beyond the home spun ambiance, the key Nub's lure is deceptively elemental – great snow. Nub's overlooks Little Traverse Bay in Lake Michigan which pumps 140 inches of lake effect powder onto the slopes each winter, but beyond that are 242 snowguns covering just 248 acres, a number that borders on overkill but clearly depicts what Nub's is all about. Make no mistake, skiers appreciate the effort. Pat Spaulding of Harbor Springs has skied Nub's almost every ski day during the last 22 years. “I ski here because they have the best snow and grooming in Michigan and they go out of their way to make the conditions perfect,” she claims. This explains why readers of SKI magazine have rated Nub's number one in Midwest snow and grooming for 11 straight years and voted it the number one ski resort in the Midwest in three consecutive seasons (2002, 2003, 2004).

The consistent snow-grooming mantra has been the Nub's theme since the resort opened in 1957. There have been only two owners and three general managers during that time and all have been single minded in adhering to the resort's mission. “We don't

care if we're the biggest and we never want to lose the personal touch, but we do care about being the best," states Walter Fisher, who has owned Nub's since 1977.

Bartlett, who has been the GM for the past 19 years, keeps the operation on track from his desk situated smack between the skier services desk and the men's bathroom. "I can hear every comment that a customer makes and I can respond right off the bat without having to filter things through five other people," he emphasizes.

Located between Petoskey and Harbor Springs in environs Ernest Hemingway once described as "the last best place," Nub's is in a region that's been a summer magnet for the upper crust from Chicago, Detroit and elsewhere in the Midwest since turn of the century. With hundreds of local shops, lodging options and restaurants, once the snow arrives and the summer trade heads south, skiers have the run of the place and they flock in from southern Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois. The towns drip with history and art galleries dot the business districts, providing a funky yet upscale ambiance.

Out at Nub's Nob, however, the skiing is decidedly no-nonsense. The area's skiers are serious about their fun and although Nub's takes great pride in beginner programs you'll find more expert skiers on its slopes than at most other resorts. The draw is a 53-trail, two peak layout that skis bigger than its unassuming 427' vertical would suggest on surfaces that redefine the meaning of corduroy.

The front side of the main peak is characterized by perhaps the scariest sight from a parking lot in Michigan, a set of check-your-life-insurance black diamonds that seem to snarl down at their fresh victims. Scarface and Smokey are pretty consistent pitches and are the most manageable, but Chute with a couple of tricky shelves and Twilight Zone often littered with burial ground sized moguls call for either courage or bad judgment. A good bailout is Sno Pro, an elbow-shaped sweeping blue cruiser.

More sublime is the north side, mostly wide open intermediate terrain, with Dorries Bowl for GS arcs and Birch Run for racers.

Nub's South has a totally different character, long and slender intermediate-novice tree-lined trails that slither toward Little Traverse Bay. Slicing down the narrow Bayview or Southern Comfort has the feel of East Coast skiing, and popping into the Southern Comfort Glade after a powder dump is a hoot.

The six lifts that service these three faces all converge at the top of the peak, which is a family friendly aspect of Nub's. "You can always find a place to ski because the trails go in three directions," observes David DiLoreto. "All the chairs are color coded and return to the top so you can keep track of your kids. It's very convenient."

Beginners aren't left out either. Right in front of the lodge is Big Time, a 10% grade run with its own quad chair that newbies can ski free of charge.

Just north of Big Time is a snowboard Superpipe Arena, a monster with 16-foot walls that has hosted regional competitions for Olympic hopefuls. Nub's also has a complete terrain park and additional halfpipe next to the Red Chair along Dorries Bowl.

Apart from the main peak along the eastern boundary of the ski area, Pintail Peak is sort of a smaller version of the Outback at Keystone. With 13 mostly blue-green runs carved into a hardwood forest and its own quad lift, skiing Pintail is like being at a totally separate ski resort. It's capped by the 100-seat Pintail Peak Warming House with picture windows pointed southwest revealing vistas stretching all the way to the city of Charlevoix 23 miles across the Bay and the edge of North Fox Island 12 miles beyond

that. "Pintail is where I like to ski at Nub's because it's like your own private area," says Theresa DiLoreto. "Borderline is my favorite and I love the views of the Bay."

Back at the main base area is the Nub's Day Lodge, which won a Snow Country Magazine design award in 1996, and seems more like a local's ski club than a resort lodge. A big stone fireplace surrounded by comfy chairs, a cozy bar, and huge picture windows facing the slopes all contribute to the laid-back atmosphere. Not to mention the home made soups, made-from-scratch pizza, and belt-busting freshly baked pies and cookies. The food is so good that townsfolk actually come out to the ski area for lunch!

The truth of the matter is that Nub's just has something that keeps drawing people back. A good example is Scott Stillings, who's been skiing the resort for over 40 years. Stillings, a Midwest ski industry veteran, highly acclaimed race coach, statewide radio ski reporting personality for the past 26 seasons, and a former rep for a ski binding company, returned to Nub's three years ago to become the director of the Winter Snowsports School overseeing a staff of 100 instructors. "What impresses me about these guys is their single-minded focus on what they do. We talk about improvements for the coming year on a daily basis while other resorts are discussing the upcoming golf season. It's 'how can we make things better for next year based on what's happened to us live today.'"

Reflective of this attitude is the teaching philosophy Stillings espouses, which is different than virtually all other ski areas. "Put five kids in a room with five pianos and one teacher, and then put one kid in another room with one piano and one teacher. Who do you think will find middle C first?" he asks. This apt analogy describes the Nub's approach to novice instruction where the first thing each student experiences is a one-on-one 90-minute lesson. "We can teach more in that 90 minutes with individual attention than a kid can learn in a week of group lessons," he adds.

"It's pretty simple, actually," concludes Bartlett. "All we can control is our little sphere here, so I don't have to care about sharpening the golf course mower blades or if the greens have winter kill. All we care about every day is what happens to the snow and that our customers have as good a day as they possibly can."

Catch Nub's on a crystal clear day with the sun sparkling off the Bay and your skis dancing atop a Nub's groom job and you'll see what Bartlett means.

STATISTICS - 248 skiable acres; 49 trails; 427' vertical drop; 140 annual inches plus 100% snowmaking; 3 quads, 3 triples and 2 double chairlifts, 1 paddle tow at the Superpipe. 20% of the slopes are rated Expert, 50% Intermediate, and 30% Easiest. 28 kilometers of groomed cross country skiing with one mile lit for night skiing. Full ski shop with tunig services and ski/snowboard demo program.

CHILD CARE - Complete child care service. Hours 8:30 until 5pm. 7 days a week. Reservations requested for all children and required for infants (minimum age is 6 months). 1-800-SKI-NUBS.

SKI SCHOOL - Winter Sport Schools Lessons for ski, snowboard, snowblade, cross country, and telemark for all ages. To reserve a lesson call 1-800-SKI-NUBS ext. 23.

DINING - Teddy Griffin's Road House (231-526-7805; www.teddygriffins.com), decorated with Red Wings memorabilia, for almond-crusted walleye, lake perch and ribs combos, and gourmet pizza. La Senorita (231-347-7750; www.lasenorita.net) for the Famous Sizzling Fajitas, ice-cold Ultimate Margaritas, and Mexican peanut butter pie. The Mitchell Street Pub for walleye sandwiches and the best onion rings in the North (231-347-1801).

LODGING – There is no lodging on site at Nub's. Grab some history at the Perry Hotel in Petoskey where Hemingway once slept (231-347-4000; www.theperryhotel.com). Stay minutes from Nub's at the Best Western of Harbor Springs, 46 units with full kitchens and access to an indoor pool and hot tub (231-347-9050). Check lodging options at the Petoskey, Harbor Springs, Boyne City Visitors Bureau (800-845-2828; www.boynecountry.com) or at www.nubsnob.com/html/arealodging.htm.

APRES SKI - For a uniquely local experience stroll through Petoskey's Gaslight District, a quaint shopping district dating back to the turn of the century. Stop in at the Thomas Kinkadee Gallery (231-487-0422; www.thomaskinkadee.com), home of America's most collected living artist who creatively fills his paintings with "love notes" by hiding the letter "N" in all his paintings as tribute to his wife Nanette. Be sure to belly up to the bar at the circa 1910 City Park Grill (231-347-0101; www.cityparkgrill.com), an Ernest Hemingway hangout where Papa was inspired to write the short story "Killers," based on his experiences there

GETTING THERE - From SE Michigan: Take I-75 to Gaylord Exit 282. Follow M-32 west to US 131, turning north to Petoskey. You'll eventually funnel into Petoskey on US-131. At the intersection of US-131 and US-31, follow US-31 north 5 miles through Petoskey to M-119. Turn left on M-119 for 3 miles and watch for the Nub's Nob sign at the corner of Pleasantview Rd. Turn right on Pleasantview and go 3 miles; Nub's Nob is on the right. CONTACT 1-800-SKI-NUBS or 231-526-2131; www.nubsnob.com.

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