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HAVENS | BRIDGTON, ME.

## Lakes for Snowmobiling Now and Boating Later

By DIANE MEHTA

IT is water, whether falling as powdery snow at a [ski](#) area or freezing as ice on a lake perfect for snowmobiling, that defines the part of western [Maine](#) around Bridgton that is known as the Lakes District.

With two major lakes and a “pond” — Long Lake, Highland Lake and Moose Pond are 5,295 acres, 1,334 acres and 1,697 acres, respectively — Bridgton is a winter playground, with ice [fishing](#), snowshoeing and ski touring as options. And it’s equally attractive in summer, residents and second-home owners say. Most weekenders hail from elsewhere in the state and Massachusetts; Boston is less than three hours away and Portland, Me., is 45 minutes southeast.

The Town of Bridgton was incorporated in 1794 and named for an earlier settler named Moody Bridges. The town grew, powered by industries that depended on water: there were grist mills, foundries, a tannery, a woolen mill and sawmills. In 1883, the narrow-gauge Bridgton and Saco River Railroad connected the area to the outside world, making it easier to carry freight and passengers. The railroad fueled more growth, and a summer population took shape. The lakes became dotted with rustic summer camps for children, which flourished for years while families vacationed nearby. The town’s 64 square miles are now home to about 5,400 people.

The area’s first-rate skiing and varied terrain have long drawn sports enthusiasts from across New England, who have been buying vacation homes here since the late 1970s when locals started winterizing their homes and out-of-towners began buying them up. Shawnee Peak ski area is right in town, and Sunday River and the smaller Lost Valley and Mount Abram are all within an hour’s drive north.

A half-hour west, around North Conway, N.H., are Mount Cranmore, Black Mountain and Wildcat.

“Sunday River has every bit of terrain you could imagine,” said Sue Polansky of Lynnfield, Mass., who with her husband, Jeff, owns a timber-frame house on Long Lake. “It’s like skiing out West, because there’s everything from double diamonds to green circles.”

The Polanskys — she is a social worker and he is an orthopedic surgeon — bought a house on the lake in 1989 for \$255,000, tore it down in 2006 and bought eight more acres for \$330,000. Their current six-bedroom, 4,500-square-foot lodge-style house was completed in 2007.

The family’s activities are shaped year-round by the lake, Ms. Polansky said. In summer their children go wakeboarding, tubing, boating and swimming, and bounce on a water trampoline with their friends.

In winter, she said, “We go out on the lake with snowmobiles — from the lake there’s miles of snowmobile trails that can take you anywhere, even up to Canada. We also go cross-country skiing on the lake.”

Every year, Tom Gyger, a third-generation native, cuts 15 to 20 miles of cross-country trails on his 225-acre farm near

Bridgton and on neighboring land protected by the Loon Echo Land Trust, which safeguards more than 3,300 acres in the area. Part of the appeal of the farm, and of Bridgton over all, is access to land. Neighbors routinely open up their land to the public, so skiers or snowshoers have plenty of snow to tackle.

“For those that don’t like winter, it’s an eternity,” said Mr. Gyger, whose Five Fields Farm is an apple orchard by summer and a winter sports destination come December, “but for those who find something to do and like winter, it’s never long enough.”

Mike Doucette of Westbrook, Me., an electrician and window installer, paid \$319,000 for a two-bedroom condominium on Shawnee Peak in 2006. “It’s a nice family mountain,” Mr. Doucette said, “and everybody that works there gets to know you. I grew up skiing there, brought our kids up skiing there, and when our kids were younger the lift attendants were like a second baby sitter.”

Some weekenders are motivated more by the serenity of the landscape than by sports. Bill and Pam Brucker of Branford, Conn., who teach at Southern Connecticut State University, said they appreciated that Bridgton was a diverse community but not a wealthy one, and bought a Victorian farmhouse on half an acre in October 2008. The property was in foreclosure and needed work, but they bought it on impulse for \$125,000.

“The house is structurally sound, though about 140 things need to be fixed,” Mr. Brucker said. The 3,700-square-foot house has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a finished barn. Ms. Brucker has ambitious plans for the property: “I’m an avid gardener, and I’m anxious to bring the [gardens](#) back to where they were before.”

#### The Scene

Main Street has a refurbished movie theater called the Magic Lantern, along with stores selling bric-a-brac, a yarn shop and two bookstores. Most days you’ll see only a handful of people, unless it’s on a weekend in winter or during the high season in summer, when weekenders or vacationers flood in. They run from blue-collar to professionals, though most come with families to enjoy the outdoors. Beth’s Kitchen Café is bustling for lunch, and people seem to congregate for breakfast all day at the ’50s-style Ricky’s Diner (meatloaf dinner, \$7.95; homemade Grape-Nuts custard, \$1.75; blueberry pancakes, \$2.50), open about a decade and with an old jukebox that plays three songs for a quarter.

While Bridgton is more of a family town than other ski centers, occasional après-ski revelry gets under way at the bar at Shawnee Peak and at local restaurants like the Black Horse Tavern. The Musers Bowl Winter Carnival, a 10-day event in late January, hosts a biathlon — the Olympic sport that combines cross-country skiing and target shooting — as well as dog sled racing and broomball (like hockey, but with brooms and tennis balls).

If you’re in town to check out the area, Noble House (81 Highland Road, 888-237-4880; [www.noblehousebb.com](http://www.noblehousebb.com)) is a comfortable inn by Highland Lake with nine rooms that start at \$125 for the winter season.

#### Pros

The town has a Hannaford, a spacious and well-stocked supermarket on Route 302. There will soon be a new public park, as the Loon Echo Land Trust recently bought a 59-acre tract to be developed and bequeathed to the town. Bridgton gets more snow than most parts of Maine, with 90 to 100 inches a year; a representative of Shawnee Peak said snowfall there last year was over 200 inches.

#### Cons

Maine winters are rugged, and Bridgton's heavy snow — in 2008, more than any county in Maine except the most northern, Aroostook near Canada — makes four-wheel-drive, plowing and sanding necessities, homeowners say. Ice storms can occasionally paralyze the area for days.

#### The Real Estate Market

Almost all second-home buyers are looking for waterfront, real estate agents say. For waterfront property, said Tim Perry, an agent at Krainin Real Estate, the highest sale in 2008 was about \$740,000. For water access — there are subdivisions with rights of way to private [beaches](#) — prices drop to about \$470,000. Homes without access start around \$140,000, whether they're near Shawnee Peak or in town. No architectural style predominates; there are colonials, split-levels, capes and chalets.

“It's almost impossible to get a lot of acreage combined with waterfront,” said Peter Thornton, an agent at Legacy Properties, an affiliate of Sotheby's International Realty, “though there's plenty of acreage in the woods.” Properties are taking about 120 days to sell, where previously they took 30 days, he said.

The waterfront property market went soft in late 2007, first slowing and then staying flat; since October 2008 prices have dipped 5 percent to 10 percent, Mr. Perry said. He said the condominium market was largely driven by Shawnee Peak. Newly constructed slopeside condos at East Slope Condominiums there sell for \$279,000 to \$299,000.

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