



### **Third time's the charm**

Smooth skiing on a trip to Canaan Valley, W.Va.

### **Richmond Magazine**

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Issue: [January 2009](#)

Posted: 2/2/09 2:08 PM

CANAAN VALLEY, WEST VIRGINIA – It's official. I have broken my self-proclaimed President's Day Weekend curse. Although I ended up in the ambulatory care center at VCU Health Center following this same mid-February weekend for two consecutive years from ski trips gone awry, I finally broke the hex this year.

And this was despite my best efforts to injure myself. When I told Canaan Valley Resort Marketing Manager Bryan Brown of my history, he said, "I hesitate to mention this, but have you ever tried airboarding?"

But I didn't hesitate: A new, crazy, action-adventure sport? Sign me up!

Airboarding involves riding an inflatable raft down ski runs. It's tubing on Speed. You get a running start, hold on to handles on either side of the raft and careen wildly down the mountain with nothing to control your path but the subtle shifting movement of your body and quite a bit of prayer. To borrow West Virginia's tourism catch-phrase: it's Wild and Wonderful.

To get to the top of the mountain, you ride the ski lifts, and to get to the bottom of the mountain, you ride the same greens, blues and even blacks that the skiers

and snowboarders are using. (Lookout below!) To slow, you drag your feet (preferably in ski boots) or even your knees if necessary. To stop, you pretty much pick yourself up and turn yourself sideways, what our instructor called, "the hockey puck." Except for us beginners, it was more like "the turtle," because we ended up rolling over the raft and riding on our backs.

Chris took about 15 airboarding wannabes out for a one-hour lesson and then we were let loose on the ski runs on our own. In our group, we had about equal numbers of men and women and one little boy. I knew it was a daunting challenge to take that first run, when one member of our group insisted: "Women and children first."

Canaan Valley Resort in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia is one of the few ski resorts in the country that offers airboarding, so Dave and I are particularly proud of the airboarding licenses we were issued following successful completion of the course. We had our pictures taken and everything. I'm pretty sure I'm the only person I know other than him who is a card-carrying member of this exclusive airboarding club.

But Canaan offers a lot more than airboarding. There is skiing, of course, snow boarding, ice skating on a covered rink, and horse-drawn sleigh rides among other winter activities. In fact, Canaan was recently voted by Men's Journal and USA Today as one of the "10 Coolest Mountain Towns" in North America.

Just 225 miles from Richmond, Canaan does require traversing some twisty, turning mountain roads, so it took us five hours to get there, but just four to get home again.

We arrived rather late on a Friday night, but were delighted to find cheese, crackers and fruit and bottled water waiting for us in the room. We added wine to the late-night picnic and cranked up the heat to have a cozy warm-up for the big day ahead.

Saturday, we awoke to misty rain and major fog. We headed over to the main lodge for breakfast and found a warm and cold buffet awaiting with anything we might want to fuel up for the day. I went straight for the bacon, scrambled eggs and hashbrowns, while Dave had the more healthy fruit, yogurt, hard-boiled egg and toast.

Neither of us was too excited for the day's skiing prospects, but no one wanted to admit it. However, by the time we got our equipment rentals, the misty rain had stopped and was turning to snow flakes and the fog was beginning to lift.

At the top of the mountain, we fortuitously met a boy scout who had skied Canaan many times. We adopted Lucien as our own personal ski guide and never made a wrong move on the slopes with this Baltimore high schooler leading the way.

I have to say that I was more than a bit cautious initially because my very last ski run (last year at Snowshoe) involved me hobbling off carrying my ski equipment back to base camp with a quickly swelling right foot.

However, after two or three runs down the beginner (green) runs, I was getting my ski legs back and ready for blues. Canaan may not have high-speed chair lifts, but as Dave often said, "They do the basics right." The runs were long and well-groomed. There were enough side runs and variety to keep things interesting for skiers of all levels.

And hey, if it wasn't challenging enough for you, you could always make your own fun. Dave, who grew up with skis on his feet in Austria, thought we could successfully navigate across a ski lift that turned out to be way icier than either of us bargained for. I did a beautiful belly flop and snow angel there in the snow, but that was my biggest calamity of the weekend.

The afternoon was our airboarding session, followed by a whirlpool soak with many of our fellow airboarders and skiers. This is such an intimate place, we were sure to run into these same folks over and over, and we did.

Dinner reservations were for 7, but really were not necessary. Because many of the patrons were at Canaan with large groups (boy scouts, girls scouts, etc.), they had their own banquet rooms, and didn't overtax the dining facilities.

Saturday is prime rib night, and though I am not a big buffet fan, I found about 10 things I loved for dinner – not the least of which was as an incredibly fresh beet and feta cheese salad of my own design.

Unlike many ski resorts, there is not much in the way of rocking night life at Canaan. Instead of dancing the night away after dinner, we wandered down to the ice skating rink and later amused ourselves by seeing how close we could get to the nearly tame, resort deer.

Sunday was a perfect ski day – cool, crisp and sunny. We did some light skiing, but then lighted out of there early so I could get safely home having broken the President's Day Weekend Skiing Curse.

### **A HIGHLIGHT OF THE TRIP**

For a memento of West Virginia, stop by the Mountain Made Artisan Gallery (304-463-3355; [www.mountainmade.com](http://www.mountainmade.com)) to pick up a piece of artwork by one of 600 West Virginia artisans. Located in the Buxton & Landstreet Building, a former coal company store, the shop offers everything from jams and jellies to jewelry and furnishings.