



# SNOW BOND

WHEN CHOOSING YOUR COMPANIONS FOR  
A WINTER ADVENTURE, NEVER OVERLOOK  
THE ENTERTAINMENT FACTOR. AND BE  
SURE TO INVITE GEORGE ORWELL.

By Jay Atkinson  
Photos by Joe Klementovich

If sleeping ever becomes an Olympic sport, then Chris Pierce will win a gold medal. So getting Piercey out of bed and away from his family at 5 a.m. means something is afoot. Driving us through a Franconia Notch snowstorm, he reaches over and pounds my shoulder.

“Oh yeah,” Piercey says. “It’s on like Donkey Kong!”

We’re northbound at such an ungodly hour to undertake three adventures — fat biking, snowshoeing and ice climbing — in just over a day. Frequent co-conspirators, Piercey and I enjoy dreaming up winter events for our rugby pals and their wives, testing the limits on what they’ll agree to. One time, we convinced a dozen friends to snowshoe up to the Imp Profile, just south of Gorham. The temperature fell to -8, and a few of the wags began calling it “the polar death march.”

Prone to breaking out in loud monkey sounds — “oo! OOO! Ah! AH! AHH!” — Piercey, 43, is a rugged, venturesome fellow. Together we’ve played in dozens of rugby matches; taken winter paddling trips down the Merrimack River; traced Jack Kerouac’s footsteps along the Pacific coast; and co-founded our own DIY backcountry triathlon (sans fees, race numbers and water stations) that’s held every September in Rumney, New Hampshire. A former collegiate wrestler, Piercey is built like a piano mover, but light on his feet and hard to keep up with.

For this trip we needed a third guy, someone who would say yes without giving it much thought. Backcountry skier, climber and photographer Joe Klementovich, 46, was our first choice. A tall, angular fellow who volunteers on the Mountain Rescue Service, Joe and I collaborated on an outdoor story and hit it off. I’ve worked with a few shutterbugs that moped around like Van Gogh, complaining about the light, etc., but he has a mischievous sense of humor and a deadpan expression reminiscent of Buster Keaton. When choosing your companions, never overlook the entertainment factor.

At 8 a.m., we meet Joe to go fat biking. Located just outside of Littleton, the Parker Mountain trail network encompasses more than 800 acres of private land. Twenty-four miles of biking trails wind up and around the 1,905-foot mountain, offering a variety of easy, moderate and difficult routes, just like a ski area.

Dave Harkless, owner of Littleton Bike & Fitness, has carted our rental bikes to the trailhead. Known as a hub for off-road biking, Harkless’ store has a funky vibe, with a wide selection of bicycles, parts, gear and clothing, a large repair bay, and two eerie-looking mannequins dressed in cycling togs.

On my first trip to Littleton Bike & Fitness, I rented a bike on Saturday, intending to ride the next day. We’re closed Sundays, said an employee named Darleen. Crestfallen, I turned to leave when she handed over a new cable lock.

“Just fix it to the back stairs when you’re done,” Darleen said.

In addition to our bikes, Harkless, 54, has a 200-cc Rokon motorcycle in the back of his truck. Attached to the motorcycle is a weighted horizontal tire on a chain, which

Orwell’s “Homage to Catalonia” in my backpack, since Orwell is pleasant company and his experience as a journalist-turned-combatant during the Spanish Civil War puts my own adventures in perspective. (As a distraction from the cold and squalor of the trenches, Orwell liked to read detective stories.) But there won’t be much reading today. Halfway up Parker Mountain, I’m drenched in sweat and lay the bike down to swap out my heavy gloves. From this vantage point, I can see for miles, with snow flitting down from a low gray sky. As I suck water from my hydration pack, the only sound is an occasional birch creaking in the wind.

Piercey hoots from up above — “Ooo-oo! AAhh! AH! OOO!” Upon reaching the top, I start to feel cold. “Gotta keep my heart rate up,” I say.

“Waiting on you,” says Piercey. And away



Writer Jay Atkinson (front) and Chris Pierce during the fat biking portion of their winter adventure. They chose the Parker Mountain trail network outside of Littleton. On the opposite page, Pierce rides in front of Atkinson.

he pulls along to groom the trails.

Maintaining the trails is a community endeavor. Donations from local cyclists help defray the cost of gas, motorcycle repairs and “a beer or two” for volunteers, Harkless says.

Snow has fallen overnight, and it’s 25 degrees with little wind — perfect weather for fat biking. Dave zooms ahead on the motorcycle and the three of us follow him across an open field and beneath the skirt of pines. Ascending a trail called Homegrown, we zigzag down into snowy hollows and up the other side, surrounded by a thousand Christmas trees jacketed in snow.

On winter excursions, I carry George

he goes across a snowy ridge and then downslope through a grove of fir trees.

We turn onto Bridge Road trail, with Piercey in front and Joe right behind me. Palmer Brook runs alongside, and as Piercey angles between the trees, he says, “Bridge here.” I tilt my handlebars to the left, squeezing between two pines, and there’s a short wooden bridge spanning the brook. As soon as I reach the icy planking, the bike slides hard right and I tumble off to the left.

There’s a sudden feeling of weightlessness. I reach out my left hand, dropping through space, and utter a phrase I’d never say in church. It’s a pleasant flight, though I realize

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the landing will be abrupt. I just go with the flow, aiming to land shoulder — hip — knee to break my fall.

Whoosh! — I hit the water. The brook is thigh deep, and so cold it burns. Thrust below the surface, I whack my head against a broken branch jutting up from the creek bed. I'm grateful for my helmet, since the branch thuds against the plastic behind my left ear.

Joe yanks me upright. "That looks like fun," he says, hauling me onto the bank.

"Heart rate up?" asks Piercey, laughing.

My outer layer has kept me dry, but water seeps beneath my gaiters into my boots. Hypothermia is a risk under these conditions, so it's best to keep moving. Riding downhill, Piercey barrels into a ditch formed by rivulets creasing the trail. But he's able to launch himself over the handlebars, sprawling on the other side while his bike ends up in the water.

"Lucky you're not clipped in," I say, skidding to a stop.

"Amen, brother," Piercey says.

Zipping ahead, I cross a few snow bridges over running water. I'm glad I'm lighter than those guys, because they're probably going to break through. Descending the trail at



Piercey (left) and Atkinson take a break from fat biking. Below, Atkinson rides on.

a good clip, I duck beneath an archway of frozen branches, whooping and hollering like a little kid.

Joe and I complete a tricky 5-mile loop and return to the starting point to find Piercey's car running and a note that read, "Get warm, brother. Doing one more circuit."

"He'll be back tomorrow," I tell Joe.

Piercey and I scarf down trail mix on the ride over to The AMC Highland Center at Crawford Notch. The next event is a short recovery hike. We change our clothes in the parking lot, our vehicles a jumble of outdoor

equipment and neon-hued outerwear. At first glance, it appears we don't know what the hell we're doing.

But for three days, we've pored over the forecast with the zeal of Galileo studying the stars. Any change in the weather can affect what you'll need, and an error in planning can ruin your trip.

A physical therapist and strength trainer, Piercey is familiar with the potential mishaps. "Just dialing in the clothing — for the wind, the temperature, the moisture, all that stuff — is going to make or break your experience," he says.

Each participant should have experience in one or more activity. For this trip, you'll need hydration packs, fat bikes, bike helmets, snowshoes, hiking boots, ice climbing boots and helmets and hardware; crampons, ice axes, harnesses, ropes and various items of wind- and waterproof clothing. And you must stage your gear in the order it'll be used, so it's easy to access when you need it.

"If you don't plan properly, it's not going to turn out well and people aren't going to have fun," Piercey says.

We strap on our snowshoes and head into the forest, where the new snow is over

a foot deep. Other trekkers having busied themselves on the trails across Route 302, we have the entire snowbound glen to ourselves. Only a single cross-country skier has gone through here, but in a half-mile the tracks veer off and we're breaking trail.

With Joe off somewhere in the woods, Chris and I go padding around Lake Ammonoosuc, catching up on family and work news. Recent mild temperatures have left stretches of open water on the lake.

Whistling from the other shore, Joe hoists his camera, motioning us onto the lake. But the ice looks about as robust as the Russian economy.

"He's kinda bossy," I say.

Piercey takes one step and breaks through the ice. "Right here's good," he yells.

Afterwards, we convene at the J-Town Deli & Country Store in Jackson across from the ski touring center. Today's specials include roasted carrot and maple ginger soup, which warms the chill in my bones. In the dining area, three generations of an outdoorsy family occupy a long table. Otherwise, the place is empty.

Piercey heads for the restroom, but a middle-aged woman carrying a large hand-

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bag arrives ahead of him. Moments later, the woman emerges and Piercey goes in. We can hear water running, and then Piercey exits with the lady's handbag slung over his shoulder. He sashays past the woman's table and the whole place starts cracking up.

You could say I go ice climbing every chance I get, although technically this is my first opportunity. But I'll try anything once,

except dueling with pistols. On this leg, Piercey and I are relying on Joe, a veteran of challenging winter ascents throughout New England and at Chamonix in the French Alps. While Piercey and I are trying on ice climbing boots at International Mountain Equipment in North Conway, Joe talks with the owner, Rick Wilcox.

An upbeat, avuncular man, Wilcox, 69, looks like a bantamweight Teddy Roosevelt.



The group snowshoes along the loop trail that goes around Lake Ammonoosuc.

He has 50 years of experience “climbing with a rope,” which includes 36 trips to the Himalayas. In 1991, Wilcox led an expedition to Mount Everest, the first of its kind by climbers from the eastern United States. Four of the eight climbers reached the summit, including Wilcox.

Wilcox served as president of the non-profit Mountain Rescue Service from 1976 to 2016. He has worked alongside Joe on a number of troublesome rescues, and says we’re in good hands.

“Ninety percent of ice climbing is common sense, and Joe has plenty of that,” Wilcox says.

That night, we drop into the Wildcat Tavern in Jackson. My rugby pal, Stu Dunlop, who owns the 11-room inn, dining room and bar, is out of town visiting his daughter. But Stu’s wife, Linda, 47, a lanky brunette who played basketball at the University of Vermont, is there with a girlfriend. Over drinks, Linda and her friend start chatting with us.

Years ago, when I was going to school in Denver, pop singer Todd Rundgren’s sister

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lived across the hall. I happen to mention that Ms. Rundgren occasionally popped in to have dinner with my roommate and me.

“Who’s Todd Rundgren again?” Linda asks. Rundgren’s most popular song was “Hello, It’s Me,” but none of us can remember the tune. Piercy finds a YouTube video of Rundgren performing the song, and lays his phone over an empty water glass, amplifying the sound.

*“I’ll come around to see you once in a while, or if I ever need a reason to smile.”*

Soon we’re all singing and Linda’s friend dances between the tables, waving her hands around like she’s at Woodstock. A few employees are drawn to the commotion, but retreat when they see it’s Linda’s party.

I text Stu: “Your wife is getting out of hand.” “Send me a photo,” he replies.

At 7 a.m., we meet Joe at the Arethusa Falls trailhead on Route 302 in Crawford Notch State Park. We load our packs with the ice climbing gear, and start hiking over to Frankenstein Cliff. During winter, Frankenstein’s rocky outcroppings are trans-



This page and opposite: The group hikes to Frankenstein Cliff.





At Frankenstein Cliff the ice climbing begins.



Pierce (front) and Atkinson prepare to switch over to ice climbing gear.

formed into jumbled pillars of ice.

To reach the cliffs, we follow the Conway Scenic Railroad tracks, which are shut down until June. The sky is a clear, brilliant blue, and it's a lot warmer than yesterday. I can hear run-off trickling down the cliffs.

Beyond the Frankenstein Trestle, we run into a wiry, grizzled climber who, squatting by the tracks, resembles a 19th-century train robber. He has mean eyes, and is smoking a cigarette. Beside him stands a silent gangly youth with ears that stick out. Nodding hello, I ask if they've finished climbing or are just getting started.

"We were over there," says the train robber, between drags on his cigarette. He points up the tracks to Standard Route.

"How was it?" I ask.

He gives me a dead-eyed stare. "I wasn't feelin' it," he says.

The sun has risen over Crawford Notch and is shining directly on the ice. Wriggling into my harness, I fiddle with the crampons like a prehistoric man with a slide rule. Because of the deteriorating conditions, Joe provides a very brief lesson in using the gear and we scramble up Standard's lower slope.

Anchored behind a boulder, Piercey and I watch Joe climb the first two pitches like a cat ascending an escalator. Perched in a cave 100 feet above us, Joe is securing the ropes we'll use to follow him up. A few chunks of ice bounce down the slope, and Piercey and I duck behind the rock to avoid them.

"You all right?" asks Piercey.

I feel queasy, like it's right before a rugby match. "It's getting in my head."

"Just breathe," Piercey says.

Joe halloes down, saying he's on belay and I can start climbing. When I push off, digging in my ice axe and angling across the slope, it's a lot harder than Joe made it look. Trying to maneuver on the rotten snowpack and getting a firm grip with the axe is a leg-twitching, arm-trembling ordeal. I'm leaning too close to the cliff, unsure of the rope and the grip of my crampons. I surmount the first real obstacle, but when I reach the second of two short, steep pitches, I get stuck halfway up, breathing raggedly, my pulse hammering in my ears. I'm already gassed.

Joe lowers me down and Piercey takes a shot. After the traverse, he starts using his axe, triangulating his feet with his top hand, making it to the first boulder. Once he clears it, Piercey gets into a rhythm. Near the top, he misses with one of his crampons, staggers a bit, then recovers, and Joe pulls him up.

"Right on, brother!" I shout.

I'm last on the hike out, the sun blazing in a deep indigo sky. I'm pissed that I didn't get my axe into the ice and up that wall. But I'm reminded of Orwell, huddled in his filthy dugout, reading "The Missing Money-Lender" with shells bursting overhead. I have it easy.

In the parking lot, I shuck my heavy pack, saying, "I don't want to play the 'age' card, but ..."

"Go ahead, play it," Piercey says. He glances at Joe and they roll their eyes.

I dig in Piercey's cooler for a beer. This is my favorite part — what I call "après parking lot" — which doesn't make sense

because that means "after the parking lot," and we're in the parking lot. But drinking beer high on adrenaline is a rugby tradition we've adopted for our winter adventures. Now in a pullover and sandals, Piercey is dressed like the manager of an unsuccessful clam shack, pontificating about the quality of the local IPA he's drinking, among other topics.

Piercey's most appealing trait — or least appealing, depending on your point of view — is his boisterous unpredictability. A young couple walks by, heading for Arethusa Falls, but outfitted like they're planning to summit Denali.

"Good morning," Piercey bellows, startling them. They respond in whispers, and he calls out, "You're overdressed." The woman laughs nervously, unsure of what to say.

"No, really," says Piercey. "You should put some of that stuff in the car."

In our crowd, if people agree with everything you say, etc., that means they don't really like you. So when Joe, talking about a friend of his, gestures toward me and says, "he's nondescript, like you," and Piercey declares that my rugby stories are "decent" but "overly long," I just laugh.

After saying goodbye to Joe, we cruise down 302 while a pleasant torpor comes over me. Though Piercey is one of the most reliable guys I know, his driving terrifies me, especially in winter. No sooner have I buckled my safety belt than he goes rummaging between the seats.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask.

"We need THE SONG!" he says. I hand over a binder of CDs and he starts throwing them around like a juggler. "Nope," he says.

Suddenly, the elegiac sound of a piano fills the car. The song is Disturbed's cover of Paul Simon's "Sound of Silence."

*Neath the halo of a street lamp*

*I turned my collar to the cold and damp*

Piercey cranks open the sunroof, yelling, "This is where it gets good."

It reminds me of flying down the Kancamagus Highway with my hockey buddies when I was a teenager. Back then, we jumped off Rocky Gorge into the Swift River, had a few beers and took off, blasting Springsteen's "Thunder Road."

With the cold air rushing in, I sing along with Piercey:

*And the sign said "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls ..."*

And whispered in the sounds of silence. **NH**