



▲ A chalkboard message outside the White Grass day lodge proudly proclaims the quality of the outdoor experience at this Canaan Valley ski touring center. © Sheila McEntee

► Since 1979, Chip Chase and Laurie Little have combined their talents to make White Grass a popular place for cross-country skiers from across the mid-Atlantic. © Brent Kepner





# WINTER ENCHANTMENT AT

# WHITE GRASS

By Sheila McEntee

**O**h, the infamous winter of 2014! Just the thought of it makes me shiver. Temperatures in the single digits, my kitchen pipes frozen, the smell of my tires burning as they whirred against icy asphalt. Ugh. It seemed my childhood days of sledding gleefully and catching snowflakes on my tongue were long gone. How I ached for spring, right down to my frozen fingertips.

But then, just as the bitter weather was winding down, I suddenly changed my mind about wanting to kiss Old Man Winter good-bye. Indeed, after a cross-country ski outing at White Grass in Davis, I fell in love with him all over again.

Since 1979, White Grass has welcomed skiers and snowshoe enthusiasts whose passion is exploring quiet, well-groomed trails, where scenic beauty and nature's peace

abound. In truth, White Grass hasn't changed much since owners Chip Chase and Laurie Little opened it more than three decades ago. Winter lovers still find the same unmatched skiing experience and the same friendly, unpretentious ambiance at the cozy day lodge and natural foods café.

### **It Began in Virginia**

Chip Chase was running a cross-country skiing business on White Grass Knob in the Shenandoah Mountains of Virginia when he and his wife, Laurie Little, decided to open a business in Davis. Oftentimes there just wasn't enough snow in Virginia, so Chase would bring carloads of skiers to West Virginia. Then, a friend tipped them off about a little place in Canaan Valley where downhill skiers came in the 1960s. The former day lodge was abandoned, the tow rope and snow-making machines long idle.

Chase talked to the landowner and arranged to lease the



▲ **Andy Notopoulos checks in** rental gear at the end of a busy day.

▼ **Gabriel Rogers demonstrates how** to snap a cross-country ski boot into the ski binding. Photos this page © Sheila McEntee



property in winter for his new cross-country skiing business, named for the peak in Virginia where his original business began. Today White Grass draws skiers from across West Virginia and from every bordering state.

“There aren’t many places for cross-country skiing near the Washington, D.C. area,” says Little. “We get a lot of people from the South too.”

“We kind of have a monopoly,” Chase adds. “Nobody else in the mid-Atlantic does what we do. It might be that few want to risk the weather and not having enough snow. Others dabble in it, but at White Grass, it’s all about skiing.”

In addition to cross-country skiing, White Grass offers snowshoeing and telemark skiing (when skiers, wearing cross-country skis with a

different edge, descend hills by executing graceful turns). Instruction is offered in all three sports and guided ski tours are available. The White Grass day lodge includes a full-service ski retail, rental, and repair shop, as well as the renowned White Grass Café, open for lunch daily and for dinner on weekends during ski season.

During the season, Chase and his staff plan special events, including races, kids’ ski clinics, nature hikes, and snowshoe tours. Also among their many tasks are clearing fallen trees and grooming the 30 miles of White Grass trails, testing new gear, and keeping rental gear in tip-top shape.

Little employs a large staff in the café, which features menu items made with natural and organic ingredients.

“I have a dinner staff and I let them do what they like,” she explains. “We do something different every weekend. For lunch we do lots of soups and sandwiches.”

Little also employs a baker who creates homemade cookies, brownies, and cakes, including Chocolate Sin, a popular flourless, gluten-free chocolate cake.

“It’s gluten free but not calorie free!” she admits.

White Grass has published two popular cookbooks: *Cross Country Cooking*, now in its 10th printing, and *White Grass Flavor*, both of which feature recipes for wholesome, natural foods that are simple to prepare. (See the White Grass website, [whitegrass.com](http://whitegrass.com), for reviews and ordering information.)

In the off-season, Little operates a catering business, preparing food for wedding receptions, rehearsal dinners, and other events. Chase works as a caretaker for the cattle farm on which White Grass is located. He likes the variety his work provides throughout the year. There is the bustle and excite-

ment of ski season, and when that ends, he enjoys the focus of farm work: upkeep of cattle, roads, fences, and pastures.

Recently Chase and Little opened a cozy garage apartment, where they welcome overnight guests year round. Dubbed the “Trailside Garage Mahal Lodge,” the two-bedroom, one-bath apartment is adjacent to White Grass, making it ideal for a ski weekend retreat.

### Skiing and More

When my skiing companion, Martha Ballman, and I arrived at White Grass on a Sunday afternoon in early March, we found the parking lot packed with cars. I quickly reviewed the many license plates: West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, North Carolina—and even Alaska! Upon approaching the little day lodge, we found an outer area warmed by a crackling wood stove and dominated by a bulletin board filled with event announcements, among them live music at the Purple Fiddle in nearby Thomas and a square dance in the same little town. It was clear that this was a place where skiers could find all kinds of additional entertainment.

Martha and I stepped inside the lodge and there our fun began. The homey lodge-café was bubbling with voices, as skiers who had returned from the trails sat at long tables enjoying lunch and animated conversation. Children in snowsuits with pink cheeks played with a balloon while their young parents coaxed them to have a bite to eat. Amid the warmth of yet another woodstove hung all kinds of ski gear, including boots, gaiters, shirts, gloves, and hats.

Martha and I were a bit apprehensive; neither of us had skied in many years. But White Grass staffer Susie Haywood greeted us and put us immediately at ease. The temperature had actually climbed into the 50s and the snow was wet and soft, so she recommended cross-country skiing instead of

snowshoeing. Susie also directed us to some trails more suited for beginners.

But before embarking on our adventure, we had to sample some café fare: for me, delicious Turkish lentil mint soup and for Martha, hearty kale, barley, and mushroom soup. There was also a luscious-looking lemon pound cake with raspberry sauce that I now wish I hadn’t resisted.

After our late lunch, another friendly staffer, Gabriel Rogers, helped us select our gear and showed us how to snap our boots into the ski bindings. Then, Haywood took us outside, helped us don our skis, and gave us a complementary mini-lesson on how to cross-country ski.

“Let the skis glide,” she said. “Lift your heels and bounce with it a bit.” Thankfully, she also demonstrated how to use our poles to get back up if we fell down, which proved to be very important information!

### Meadows and a Beautiful Barn

And so we were off, lifting our heels, pressing our poles into soft, wet snow, and gliding down the Galdalf Trail. Before long, Martha and I found ourselves gazing at lovely meadows and a farmstead with a beautiful red barn. Accenting the wooded trail was some vintage farm equipment: an antique thrasher, plow, and other pieces long abandoned. We paused for a few moments to admire them, also noting the many tall trees and snags that surrounded us. The voices of a red-bellied woodpecker and crows were the only ones that joined ours.

Along the trails we encountered a moderate hill or two. After dusting the first one handily with our derrieres, we both decided to take off our skis to descend the next ones. It was easier to snap the boots back into the bindings than to haul ourselves back up off the chilly, wet ground with our poles.

After an invigorating couple of hours of skiing, we



**Head chef Laurie Little** prepares lunch fare at the White Grass café, where hearty soups and homemade baked goods are popular menu items. © Brent Kepner



gathered up our gear and walked over to the Garage Mahal to warm up and settle in. The immaculate apartment's well-equipped kitchen had all we needed to prepare a meal we'd brought from home. Afterwards, from the living room's tall windows (with their outdoor spotlight), we happily watched snowflakes fly, hour after hour, well into the evening.

The next morning, we awoke to a temperature of 19 degrees and three to four more inches of powdery snow. We donned plenty of layers, along with our skis, and headed directly onto a trail from the Garage Mahal.

### Warmth and Wilderness

There are two things I especially love about cross-country skiing: First, by constantly lifting my legs and flexing my arms to press my poles into the snow, I expend plenty of energy to stay warm. On our second day of skiing, the temperature stayed in the 20s, but I never felt cold.

Second, I love finding myself in remote places amid nature's breathtaking beauty—places I probably wouldn't discover without skis. As puffy clouds moved swiftly across a deep blue sky, Martha and I breathed the cold air and noted not only the quiet creaking of the bare trees but their exquisite shapes. We skied alongside streams where crystal clear water bubbled beneath artful ice formations. Martha later spied animal tracks—perhaps from a fox—in the deep snow. As the sun made tree shadows on the snow, only the sweet chatter of chickadees and nuthatches broke the calm.

All of the trails at White Grass are well marked, and

one we traveled offered access to a natural spring for refilling water bottles. Along this trail we met Martin and Betty Payne from Portsmouth, Virginia, who spend a week in Canaan Valley every year. The couple has come to White Grass for the past decade.

"White Grass is in a class by itself," Martin told me.

Indeed, along the trails, Chase and his staff plant sweet surprises: bear-proof boxes thoughtfully stocked with granola bars and even biscuits for canine companions. In addition, covered shelters offer benches for resting, granola bars for munching, and even jars of sunflower seeds to offer bold and expectant resident chickadees.

Martha and I skied into late afternoon, until diminishing daylight required us to head inside and relinquish our rental equipment. We'd navigated a number of trails and slopes handily, though not always in an upright position. Our adventure left us dazzled and determined to build on our new skills.

Indeed, the enchantment of White Grass chased away my winter blues. Next year, I'm keeping my date with Old Man Winter, and I know just where we'll go.

*Open December to March, White Grass is located at 643 Weiss Knob Ski Road in Davis. The website offers daily reports on ski conditions, as well as information about fees (\$20 per day for adults, \$5 for kids for trails use), lessons, lodging options, live music in the café, outdoor events at White Grass, and more. Visit [whitegrass.com](http://whitegrass.com) or call 304.866.4114.*

Sheila McEntee is editor of Wonderful West Virginia.



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**White Grass staffer**

**Susie** Haywood shows Martha Ballman of South Charleston how to hold her cross-country ski poles.

© Sheila McEntee

(Previous page right) **The**

**well-marked and pet friendly** trails at White Grass lead skiers and their companions through remote and beautiful woods.

© Sheila McEntee

(This page) **Adjacent to**

**White Grass**, the “Garage Mahal” offers cozy accommodations year round.

Exterior photo © Joel Wolpert, interior photo

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