

NORTHERN EXPLORING



WINTER 2025

WINTER WINGS

SLIDING DOWN HEAD FIRST
CURING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE
CRINKLY, CRISPLY COLD
THE LIGHT THAT TRIUMPHS
OVER DARKNESS

START

LAKE PLACID



Bobsled start at Mt Van Hoevenberg. Photo Provided



Sliding Down Head First

Story by Casey Ryan Vock

Photography by Pete Buck

(unless otherwise noted)

Now through the end of February, Mt Van Hoevenberg is presenting a chance for locals and visitors alike to try the high-speed sliding sport known as skeleton — a unique experience that puts the slider face down on a sled as they speed down a track using just their legs and shoulders to steer. Stretching 1,680 meters in total length and featuring 20 winding curves, this specific Skeleton Experience is one to leave hearts pounding.

There are few places on the planet where a novice can try the high-speed sliding sport known as skeleton. Yet Mt Van Hoevenberg's "Skeleton Experience" presents the chance to enjoy this stripped-down, head-first and solo variation of bobsledding in the heart of the Adirondack Mountains.

It's just one of the many exciting winter activities offered at the sprawling sports compound, and it allows visiting tourists and locals alike to see for themselves what makes skeleton such a thrill.

"My gosh, it'll get your adrenaline pumping," says Jen Mott, coordinator of Athlete and Accreditation Services for the Olympic Regional Development Authority (ORDA), which oversees Mt Van Hoevenberg and the Olympic Jumping Complex.

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Having zoomed down the track at least a dozen times herself, Mott speaks with not only her familiarity, but a passion for the Skeleton Experience. "You'll feel the G-force going through the turns, which gives you a just a small glimpse into what the skeleton athletes really experience when they're going from the top. It is just a phenomenal experience."

In her official capacity, Mott works closely with professional sliding athletes from all over the world who travel to Mt Van Hoevenberg to train in the state-of-the-art "icehouse" — the country's only indoor push-start facility — and on the combination bobsled-luge-skeleton track.

Stretching 1,680 meters in total length and featuring 20 winding curves, it was built to replace the aging Mt Van Hoevenberg Olympic Bobsled Run used in the 1932 and 1980 Winter Olympics.

The former track was transformed into the delightful Cliffside Coaster, the longest coaster in North America, and since its completion in 2000, the current three-sport track has become a venue of choice for numerous prestigious events.

It's hosted the International Bobsled and Skeleton Federation World Championships (IBSF) on three separate occasions, most recently in 2012, and the competition is set to return in the New Year, as the very best bobsled and skeleton athletes from across the globe will descend upon Lake Placid from March 6 to 16. Spectators are invited to attend and watch from one of several designated viewing areas along the track.

But aside from professional showcases, the track is opened each season to the public by way of the Skeleton Experience, inviting those who meet specific age and height requirements to gain a first-hand understanding of skeleton.

Participants must be at least 13 years old and at least 48 inches tall; anyone 13 to 17 must be accompanied by an adult. No matter their know-how, each rider is assisted by track staff as they lie torso-down on the skeleton bobsled — believed to be named for its barebones construction compared to that of a traditional bobsled.

Riders receive a gentle send off to glide onto the icy track, and gravity takes them from there. Using their legs and shoulders, they steer along a course that's been raced by some of the most talented athletes to compete in the sport.

Professional skeleton athletes, using a heavy push-start and a launch from steeper slopes, can reach speeds of 80 mph. But because participants in the Skeleton Experience enter from the fifth and least inclined of the track's five covered starting points, they won't get anywhere close to racing speeds.

"From start five, I think my average speed is 33 or 34 miles per hour, but you're going to get anywhere from 30 to 35 miles per hour," Mott says. She points out that all riders don protective gear — a helmet, of course, as well as goggles — and hear detailed instructions to help ensure not only a breathtaking, but safe spin on the track.



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Hundreds of guests give it a go each year, and Mott says she's seeing more locals taking advantage of the schedule outside of the holidays, including adventure-seeking seniors.

Last fall, Saranac Lake's Donna Haig made history and headlines at the frozen track, becoming the oldest person to ever ride down on it on a skeleton sled at the age of 83 years old.

"It was unbelievable," Mott says. "She's an absolutely lovely lady. [...] She had a bunch of family in town, and when she got done, they came to surprise her. Her daughter walked up to her and held a sort of fake microphone up to her and said, [...] 'How was it?' She said, 'It was fantastic; every old lady should do it.'"

Mt Van Hoevenberg presents a luge immersion in the summer using wheeled sleds and in most years it offers bobsledding for beginners alongside skeleton in the cold-weather months.

However, with the IBSF event on the horizon, staff would lack ample time to address the typical wear and tear caused by seasonal bobsledding, which tends to be harder on the track than skeleton.

Prudently, Mott says, the staff decided to not offer bobsledding for this season, but as a result, Mt Van Hoevenberg will expand the Skeleton Experience schedule, making the opportunity available to more people living in or passing through the region.

As Mt Van Hoevenberg prepares to welcome the upcoming

IBSF event, and following the announcement that the three-sport track will serve as a backup sliding venue for the 2026 Winter Olympics, Mott says this is a busy but special time for the facility's staff. "We're excited about the World Championships this year. It's going to be pretty exciting going into 2025. [...] With everyone getting ready for the 2026 [Winter] Olympics, it's going to be a pretty big competition."

The Skeleton Experience by its design is not as fast as competitive skeleton, but it still sends riders along the twists and turns of the track, which can be jolting. It's not recommended for anyone with head, neck or bone injuries; those with heart trouble, heart conditions or high blood pressure; and those who are pregnant or recently underwent surgery.

Those interested can partake in the Skeleton Experience at Mt Van Hoevenberg now through Feb. 8 on Saturdays from 1 to 5 p.m.; Feb. 15 and 16 from 1 to 5 p.m.; and Feb. 17 and 18 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit mtvanhoevenberg.com/todo/skeleton-experience. As the Skeleton Experience is dependent on suitable weather conditions, ticketholders are encouraged to check its update page on the day of their reservations for potential closures.

Casey Ryan Vock is a writer and photographer who grew up west of the Adirondacks in Jefferson County; a SUNY Plattsburgh alum, he now lives in Maryland. He can be reached at caseyrvock@gmail.com.



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