

Famous for boots, L.L. Bean knows its snowshoes, too

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

When I tripped on my oversized heel and tumbled backward onto fresh powder, I flailed for a minute like a potato bug on its back.

I was wearing a half-dozen layers on top, three on the bottom, two-foot-long aluminum contraptions on my feet and lobster-claw-shaped gloves that offered me the grace of a container ship on a creek. Aiming for nonchalance, I twisted my body around, sunk my hands and knees into the snow and considered standing.

My initial thought was that I needed to set the record straight among my friends who — when I told them I was headed to Maine for a snowshoe class — had said, “Isn’t it just like walking?”

No, friends, it’s not.

My next realization was that I was only a few steps into my class, the only student who showed up on a snowy, 12-degree Saturday in December, and my guides were now perhaps wondering what they had done to deserve me. As I pushed myself up on one foot and used my pole for leverage, one of them said they were, coincidentally, just about to cover the basics of recovering from a fall. I’d done it exactly the right way, he said.

Then we got down to the business of walking.

A few years back, I learned about the outdoor classes offered through L.L. Bean. Courses are held at or near most of the company’s 40 stores. But the Freeport flagship store (open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year) has the most by far, including free clinics on animal tracking and map reading as well as introductory courses in a dozen activities, and overnight and women-only adventures.

Gretchen Osther, director of Outdoor Discovery Schools at L.L. Bean, said the introductory courses are especially popular because the company provides all

the gear.

“It gives people a chance to try something at a really low barrier to entry,” she said in a telephone interview. If you like it, you can take more advanced courses. She told me the programming isn’t wholly different from that offered through REI’s Outdoor School.

“They’re our biggest competitor, but for all of us, the ultimate goal is to get more people spending time outside,” Osther said about REI. “When people get outside, they’re healthier, happier and more likely to become good stewards of the environment.”

Browsing the class list, I found a few activities, like archery and snowshoe, that were new to me. I’m pretty loyal to my summer staples, such as stand-up paddleboard and cycling — but FOMO, or fear of missing out — drove me to consider expanding my horizons. I signed up online for what L.L. Bean calls their snowshoe discovery course, a \$25 two-and-a-half hour introduction that included a guided trek. Forecasters in Maine were predicting the first significant snow of the season for the weekend before Christmas. I headed north.

Bill Yeo, a former collegiate cross-country skiing coach who heads up Outdoor Discovery School for the Freeport store, looked at his list of students. “You’re the only one who showed up,” he said. “Private tour!” We hopped into a 20-seater van and drove down the road to a farmhouse that serves as a base for many of the classes.

My guides, Moe and Peter, introduced themselves and covered Snowshoe Use and Safety 101. Traditional shoes, they told me, are made with wood frames and rawhide laces. Today, most are made with aluminum tubing. The flat part around your foot is called the deck, and crampons underneath the bindings help grip ice and inclines. Some models have a

SNOWSHOE CONTINUED ON F6



MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Moe Auger, an instructor for L.L. Bean Outdoor Discovery Schools, pours a hot chocolate for his solitary snowshoe-class student — the author — in December in Freeport, Maine.

I forgot about the metal contraptions and concentrated on my breath. I thought about how easy it had been to get out in the snow. No lift lines, no crazy gear, no adrenaline junkies, just me and nature, quiet and white.

If you go

WHAT TO DO
L.L. Bean Outdoor Discovery Schools

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llbean.com/ods

The company offers year-round clinics and instructional courses at or near most of its stores. Taught by expert instructors, the offerings include two-hour introductory sessions, series of classes over several weeks and intensive weekend workshops. Discovery courses are designed for beginners and range from archery to stand-up paddling, with a particular emphasis on fishing classes. In some of the most advanced classes, for instance, students learn to become an outdoor leadership guide or train in wilderness first aid. Clinics, film screenings, demonstrations and hikes are generally free. The Freeport, Maine, flagship store not only has the most robust class schedule but also offers free outdoor concerts all summer that attract thousands. (Lyle Lovett and Grace Potter performed last year; visit llbean.com/summer to learn more.) Classes range from \$7 for a fly-tying lesson to \$565 for private fly-fishing coaching sessions with a casting master.

REI's Outdoor School

Contact outdoorschool@rei.com or call your local REI store

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The co-op offers courses in 10 activities at or near its stores, including summer and winter sports, wilderness medicine, photography and navigation. Classes are generally offered multiple times throughout a season; some teach progressive skills. For example, the school offers 90-minute courses in bike maintenance: Level 1 and 2 are free; the more advanced, hands-on course, in which you work on your own bike, costs \$30. Among the most popular offerings: how to ride a bike, for adults and kids (\$45 to \$55). Others include a talk on planning an Appalachian Trail hike (free) and Shenandoah Winter Backpacking, a two-day course that includes meals and camping equipment (\$275). Courses are taught by local instructors, many of whom have advanced certifications.

— M.K.

In Maine, a stumbling snowshoe beginner dusts herself off and learns to walk

SNOWSHOE FROM F3

pivot under the ball of your foot so your heel lifts away from the deck as you walk. In addition to providing a cardiovascular challenge, snowshoes keep you from sinking into powder by creating buoyancy where boots would sink.

We set out behind the farmhouse, where L.L. Bean owns

woodland that is used for snow-sport classes, sport shooting, archery and fly casting. The ground was covered with a deep carpet of snow. White powder weighed down branches, and flakes tapped lightly on my hood and sunglasses.

Peter showed me how to turn around (slowly) and back up (don't) and then suggested I kick my foot out a little with each step.

I kicked a little too vigorously, which is how I ended up tripping on my heel. After I righted myself, we set off into the woods. In good Boy Scout fashion, Moe led my group of one and Peter brought up the rear. Soon, we were walking through brambles and berry bushes, leaving giant footprints in the snow.

Moe, an artist in his first career, looked at the trees, snow and

sky with a watercolorist's eye and talked about how he would paint the scene. Along the way, he identified trees (spruce, eastern white pine) and tested out a few jokes he typically saves for kids. He pointed out the beech tree, which has ferociously sharp spines on its branches. You remember it, he said, because you say, "Son of a beech!" I laughed, and he joked more.

The best surprise about snowshoeing is that you don't have to stay on trails. In fact, we could barely see them. We walked over small mounds and through vegetation we'd never have thought to traverse in the summer, bushwhacking with poles in front of our faces. We easily walked over downed trees like we had tanks on our feet. I forgot about the metal contraptions and concentrated on my breath. I thought about how easy it had been to get out in the snow. No lift lines, no crazy gear, no adrenaline junkies, just me and nature, quiet and white.

Halfway into our walk we stopped for a short break. My core had warmed, but my extremities had resisted. As Moe served hot chocolate from an insulated thermos, I sat on a log and slipped foot warmers into my boots. Then we continued our trek, Peter stopping to point out deer prints.

Three days later, the snow had melted in Maine and I headed home to Washington. Driving on the New Jersey Turnpike, I called a Canadian friend and told him about snowshoeing.

"We got half a foot of snow on the day of the class," I told him.

"You don't really need snowshoes for half a foot of snow," he

said, chuckling.

"It was a beginners class," I said, defensively.

"Growing up in New Brunswick, we'd go to my parents' hunting lodge in five or six feet of snow," he said. "The only way to get around was with snowshoes. Otherwise, you'd be in snow up to your waist. Or for a child, up to his ears!"

I politely ended the conversation and took some comfort in knowing that if I ever did fall wearing snowshoes in six feet of snow, I now had the skills to right myself. My mind wandered to warm-weather classes. I drove home, put away my lobster gloves and began waiting for summer.

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