

Get away to Galena for the holidays

By Mike Michaelson

*This is the text-only version of a full-page color feature story that appeared in **The Daily Herald**, Chicago's largest suburban newspaper, with 70,000 subscribers in the west and northwest suburbs. It was posted to the newspaper's website Friday, Dec. 1, 2006, and published in the newspaper Sunday, Dec, 3, 2006. It would cost \$9,000 to buy this amount of space in this newspaper. Webster's Unabridged hosted the author the previous Christmas; his visit has resulted in six separate newspaper and magazine stories.*

GALENA, Illinois -- Uncle Robert, in charge of stoker duties, positions another large log on a fire that already is crackling merrily in the hearth, and prods it expertly with a poker.

The CD player is programmed for continuous holiday music as tempting aromas of roasting turkey waft out of the kitchen. Fruit pies are ready for the oven and the traditional plum pudding needs only to be heated, flamed with brandy and drenched with hot custard.

In the downstairs rec room, "The Game" - or, at least, one of the games - has drawn its audience of die-hard football fans. In the large, open-plan living room, young children play with new toys and older kids are absorbed with newly acquired electronics.

Outside, beyond the large picture windows and sliding-glass doors, it has begun to snow again, covering the deck with a pristine white mantle. And "Frosty" doesn't seem happy with the turn of events, despite his bright red scarf and jaunty blue woolen cap. The just-fashioned snowman seems to be turning up his long carrot nose as he stares into the warm and companionable living room. The house is built on a small bluff and beyond the deck are sweeping views of wooded hillsides prettily covered with snow.

Home for the holidays? In this case, no - but how about away for the holidays?

If this is the year that you and your extended family finally decide to make good on a promise to spend the holidays together at a resort, look no further than Eagle Ridge Inn & Resort. Sprawling over 6,800 acres of rolling hills six miles east of Galena, Ill., it offers a selection of more than 300 privately owned villas, condominiums and executive homes with your choice of one to eight bedrooms. (Conventional accommodations are available in 80 luxury rooms at the inn, most with fireplaces and walkout patios or decks.)

Each winter, the clubhouse at the South Golf Course is transformed into the Nordic Ski & Winter Sports Center. Explore more than 60 kilometers of groomed cross-country ski trails that wind through scenic wooded terrain. A gentle sledding hill, suitable for pre-schoolers, and a skating pond are near the center, with skiing, sledding and skating equipment rental available (along with steaming mugs of hot chocolate).

If you're ready for a pampering spa treatment, Eagle Ridge's 6,000-square-foot Stonedrift Spa is ready to oblige. Located in the inn, it offers 10 treatment rooms, three facial rooms, wet rooms with Vichy and Tsunami showers, lounge, two manicure and two pedicure stations and a boutique. A couples-only suite features twin treatment tables and a soaking tub sized for two. Sybaritic or therapeutic, Stonedrift has it covered.

For downhill skiers, Chestnut Mountain Resort, just eight miles southeast of Galena, keeps the snow fresh all season long with advanced snowmaking equipment.

This popular resort, tucked into a wooded palisade overlooking the Mississippi, offers two additional trails this season, for a total of 19. Ranging up to 3,500 feet in length with a 475-foot vertical drop, trails slice their way through wooded bluffs down to the river's edge. Trails range in difficulty from bunny slopes (serviced by the user-friendly Magic Carpet conveyor-style people mover) to black diamond runs.

Snowboarders and snow deck riders head for one of the Midwest's largest terrain parks, where a triple chairlift provides access to seven acres of half pipes, quarter pipes and other challenges. Chestnut Mountain also caters to family groups with suites that sleep 12.

Forgot to bring bubbly for yuletide toasts? The General Store at Eagle Ridge, dressed with festive holiday lights, carries a wide selection of wines and spirits and also has a well-stocked deli case and tempting bakery counter. Favorites include jumbo cinnamon rolls and a dozen kinds of muffins. You can rent a movie, buy a book and, for that last-minute gift, find a good selection of home accessories and rustic crafts. Guests anticipating late arrival can phone ahead with their grocery lists and find the provisions waiting for them in their vacation rental home (delivery fee is \$5).

You also could do some provisioning, as well as last-minute gift shopping, in charming down-town Galena, but be sure to check holiday hours. Saturday, Dec. 23, probably is a safe bet to get ahead of early holiday closings. The choices are legion, as Main Street curves past more than 90 shops filled with apparel, chocolates, wine, cheese, jewelry, toys, housewares, antiques and collectibles. You'll also find a growing number of art galleries and studios nearby.

Stock your holiday larder at perennially-popular Galena River Wine & Cheese, housed just inside the floodgates in one of Galena's oldest commercial buildings, built in 1845. Head here for sausages, pates and olive oil tastings, as well as its namesake products. The newer Galena Canning Co. offers an array of jams, jellies, fruit preserves, mustards, relishes, salsas and sauces, including its own Galena'mite Blasting Sauce for barbecuing (and gift giving).

Mike Michaelson is a travel writer based in Chicago and the author of the guidebook "Chicago's Best-Kept Secrets."

IF YOU GO:

Information: Galena/Jo Daviess County Convention & Visitors Bureau, (877) 778-3599, www.galena.org; Chestnut Mountain Resort, (800) 798-0098, www.chestnutmtn.com; Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa, (800) 892-2269, www.eagleridge.com; Illinois Tourism, (800) 226-6632, www.enjoyillinois.com

Mileage: Galena is 160 miles from downtown Chicago.

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