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Addressing a seasonal tourist lull, inns offer ways to play in the mud

By Tim McCahill

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EATON, N.H. — Mucky roads, unpredictable weather, and wet ground that sags beneath your feet. It must be springtime in New England.

Come March, receding snow transforms the landscape into a soft, sloppy mess. New Englanders call this metamorphosis "mud season," the period of recovery between the long, brutal winter and the warm summer ahead.

But with no banner activity to accompany it — think leaf-peeping in the fall or skiing in winter — mud season brings a serious lull in tourism.

A group of inns and hotels say that's the perfect excuse to design a vacation package. The result? Getaways that focus on food, drink, and activities inspired by mud season. Add greater room availability and discount prices, and all that muck seems a little more bearable.

For guests who are hungry after a winter in hibernation, the Inn at Crystal Lake, a 12-room bed-and-breakfast in the tiny town of Eaton, offers "Swine in the Mud," smoky, thick pork chops topped with honey-chipotle barbecue sauce. To round out the meal, co-owner and bartender Tim Ostendorf whips up a "Here's Mud in Your Eye," vodka shaken with Kahlua liqueur and Hershey's syrup.

Crystal Lake isn't the only establishment with a mud-themed menu. The Inn by the Sea in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, serves warm raspberry scones drizzled with "Maine Mud" chocolate sauce for breakfast.

Devising such recipes can be taxing, says owner Maureen McQuade.

"You think that putting together a promotion like this is a snap," she says. "You have to drink a lot of chocolate martinis."

But someone has to do it. Visits to the region between ski season and summertime drop sharply, as statistics from the New Hampshire tourism office bear out.

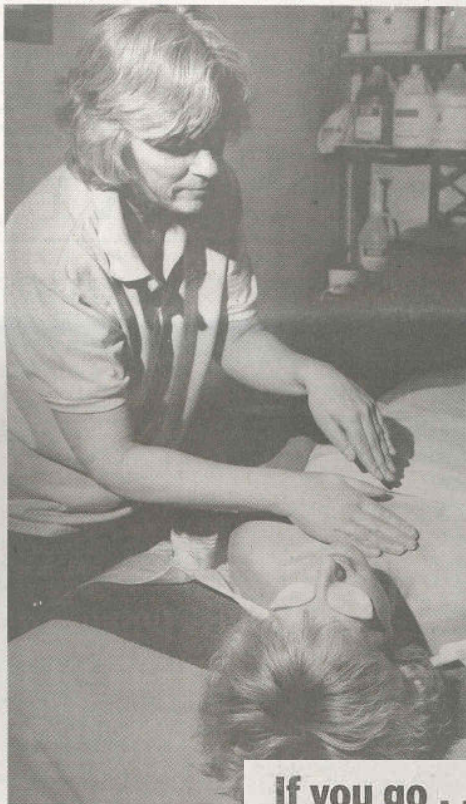
In the White Mountains, where Eaton is located, tourists spent around \$176 million in the winter of 2002. That spring they spent just \$77 million.

In the Lakes Region, popular for boating and fishing, visitors spent almost \$276 million in summer 2001. That spring, spending was around \$65 million.

"We don't have the crowds like we have in fall or summer," says Ostendorf. "It's a quieter time."

Some inns use the relative calm as a selling point.

For vacationers in need of post-winter rejuvenation, the Wayside



The Wayside Inn in Bethlehem, visitors seeking a revival after a

Inn in Bethlehem, N.H., includes a mud wrap — with a choice of three kinds of mud — in its mud season package.

"You tend to want a quiet weekend, not to do much, get away from the hustle," says Wayside co-owner Kathe Hofmann.

Lower prices are another incentive. For participating inns, costs for a two-night stay with some meals and activities included range from \$295 to \$899, down as much as \$200 compared with peak season.

For those who like a little testosterone mixed in with their dirt, the Equinox Resort & Spa in Manchester Village, Vt., offers an off-road driving course in one of its eight Land Rovers or Hummer H2s.

But don't expect any television-style heroics in the lesson: Speeds on the 80-acre course are 3 to 5 miles per hour, says Courtney Lowe, the resort's director of sales and marketing.

"The whole objective is a tread-

If you go . . .

The New England Inns and Resorts Association, www.newenglandinnsandresorts.com or 603-964-6689, includes a list of inns and hotels offering mud season packages.

Spring in New England is unpredictable. Bring a rain jacket, some warm clothes, and a pair of boots in case of inclement weather.

lightly program," Lowe says.

If the weather's right, the terrain will ensure at least some mud gets on the windshield. The course features steep hills and dramatic pitches that cause the SUVs to lean sharply to one side.

"You almost have the feeling you'll fall over, but you won't," Lowe says.

In the market for something a little less dizzying? Crystal Lake's package includes wildlife and bird-watching trips to four nearby Audubon Society sanctuaries. Adventurous guests get guides to spot birds and animal tracks, maps of the areas, and locally made soap to clean up after a day of traipsing through the muck.

"It's a terrific time," says Bobby Barker, the inn's co-owner. "It can suddenly change from one severe season to sun."