

My Life as a Transplanted Northern Mainer

What's So Great About Aroostook County?

Aroostook County, Maine, is a special place, and it takes a special kind of person to enjoy living here.

The Winters

Aroostook County is at the very top of the state of Maine. When people think of Aroostook County, most of them probably think first and foremost about the winters. Sub-zero temperatures. Blizzards. Roads crawling with snowplows: huge ones operated by the state and by various municipalities, and lots of small ones attached to pickup trucks.

The high-pitched whine of snowmobiles (they call them “sleds” here) is something you just get used to; it becomes “white noise” after awhile. This is the only place I’ve ever lived where you can drive a snowmobile to a shopping mall! That’s right: there’s a snowmobile trail that takes you right to the parking lot at a mall containing Sears, JC Penny, Kmart, and tons of other stores and shops. While you’re there, you can sled over to Lowes, a quarter mile from the mall, and pick up any building supplies you need for winterizing your house.

Some winters bring a few hundred inches of snow; other winters not so much. A few decades ago Aroostook County residents could count on a few hundred inches of snow *every* winter, but the winters tend to be milder now, probably because of our planet’s climate-change phenomenon.

Unless your personal circumstances dictate you live here against your will, you probably embrace and enjoy the extreme winter weather. If you didn’t, you’d have moved south.

For anyone that’s never lived in a really cold climate, let me talk about how we deal with the winters and how winter weather can be “embraced and enjoyed.”

We love our winter weather, but we certainly don’t like feeling uncomfortable. So, our winter wardrobes include gloves, glove liners, mittens, scarves, face masks, goggles, hats, ear muffs, socks, boots, leg warmers, long underwear, turtlenecks, neck warmers, heavy sweaters, pants, coats, jackets, and vests for every conceivable flavor of winter weather. By dressing properly we’re able to say warm and comfy even when we’re outside on cold and windy days.

The raw weather can cause the skin on our face and hands to become dry and cracked. Our solution: bottles of hand lotion placed in strategic locations around the house, mainly near the kitchen sink and near bathroom sinks. If we’re smart, we’ll also keep a bottle of hand lotion in each bedroom so it will be handy for one last, liberal application just before bedtime.

When the meteorologists tell us a blizzard is coming, we make a quick trip to the grocery store to stock up on food, toilet paper, and other essentials. We make sure we have plenty of fuel for heating the house. Then, once the blizzard starts, those of us that don’t absolutely need to go anywhere just stay put in our warm, cozy homes till the storm is over. A blizzard is raw, exciting, and beautiful to watch. You’re very

fortunate if you have the luxury of appreciating the stunning and powerful beauty of a blizzard through your windows, from the comfort of your living room.

There is nothing prettier than the sight of fresh-fallen snow blanketing the landscape. It frosts Aroostook County's millions of evergreen trees like icing on a cake. The white stuff also carpets the meadows; crochets lacey borders along the edges of frozen brooks and streams; creates puffy white curtains that drape from craggy mountaintops; and clings to rooftops on buildings, making them reminiscent of gingerbread houses.

A new blanket of snow has a profound acoustic effect on our surroundings. It's a big cushion that softens the sound of footsteps and muffles the din of traffic. The world seems gentler.

Since I work at home, I don't need to clear my driveway of snow first thing in the morning to commute to a job. I tend to do a lot of snow-shoveling at night. Shoveling snow under the stars on a crisp, cold night is a pleasure, not a chore. (Call me crazy if you want! I can't help it. That's just how I feel.)

Taking a walk or trekking through the snow on skis or snowshoes is great exercise, and at times winter's beauty is so stunning it can be a truly spiritual experience.

Frozen ponds and lakes are ready-made skating rinks. (Of course, you need to clear off the snow before you can do any skating.)

Children make snow fun out of just about anything. Snowmen stand proudly on front lawns. A little hill and a piece of cardboard or plastic to slide on make for hours of healthy, free entertainment.

What about driving on slippery roads? Well, there's no denying it can be dangerous. However, the road crews do a fine job of plowing and sanding (paying special attention to hills, curves, and intersections). And those of us that live here have learned driving techniques that minimize the danger attendant to navigating slick roads: no tailgating, no sudden moves, pump the brakes, steer out of a skid. Also, to the extent we can, we stay off the roads during stormy weather.

Many of us own 4-wheel-drive vehicles. Driving on slippery roads is easier and safer with 4-wheel drive than it is with 2-wheel drive – plus, 4-wheel drive comes in really handy if you get stuck in deep snow.

Some of our vehicles have “block heaters.” A block heater is a device you plug into an electrical outlet when your vehicle isn't in use; it keeps the engine slightly warm so it will start easily in the cold weather.

We install special “winter blades” on our windshield wipers. We either buy all-season tires (they have a deep tread that's good in the snow), or we put studded tires on our vehicles when winter begins and replace them with regular tires in the spring. We try to keep our gas tanks full or nearly full (you want a full tank in case you get stuck somewhere and need to run your vehicle's engine to stay warm). In your vehicle you want to keep a snow brush/window scraper, a blanket, a tow chain or rope, some flares, a shovel, a flashlight, extra mittens and hats.

If you come upon a vehicle that's skidded off the road, you stop to find out if the vehicle's occupants are okay. If you have a cell phone and they don't, you let them use your phone to call for help. If they need a

ride, you provide it. They'd do the same for you if the situation were reversed. I can attest to this first-hand – here's why.

Last year, a week before Thanksgiving, I was driving to the supermarket when I stopped to check on a white van that was sitting askew in a meadow not far from my house, about 30 feet off the edge of the road. We'd gotten a few inches of snow during the night, and the road was slick.

The young man who'd been driving the van wasn't hurt, nor was his little daughter, who'd been riding with him. I drove the two of them to their home about six miles away.

A few weeks later, I was on my way to a friend's house when I decided to pull my Jeep over to the side of the road so I could scrape some ice off the windshield. No sooner had I pulled over when a white van pulled up next to me. The van's driver was the young man I'd helped a few weeks earlier. He'd stopped because he'd thought I might be having car trouble.

Not only do we pay special attention to our cars and trucks during winter – our houses get a great deal of attention, too.

We do special things to our houses to conserve energy and to maximize comfort. For example, we close the doors to unused rooms during winter months. We wrap insulation blankets around our water heaters, and we enclose our plumbing pipes in tubes of foam to insulate against the cold. In late autumn, some of us attach extra insulation to our foundation walls in preparation for frigid weather; in the spring we remove it and store it away for next winter.

We get to know how our houses behave in the winter, and we make accommodations. For example, if we think our plumbing pipes might freeze in spite of the little foam jackets they're wearing, we keep our water faucets running (just a trickle) during the coldest weeks of winter. The movement of the water through the pipes discourages freezing. If our heating system tends to misbehave, we babysit it – which means we probably don't leave the house unoccupied for more than half a day. If the house is allowed to get too cold, our plumbing pipes could freeze; if that happened we'd have a messy and expensive situation on our hands.

We're *proud* of our winter weather! We delight in reporting how many inches of snow we got last night. We compare the temperature readings on our own outdoor thermometers with the temperatures reported on TV, and we savor a smug feeling of satisfaction if we have a lower thermometer reading at our house (as if it were a competition!). We swagger a little when explaining to friends and colleagues how high the snow piles are at our house (up to our waste, up to our shoulders, over our head!).

Sometimes we're downright pompous about our ability to deal with winter. We boast about how quickly we were able to clear the snow from our driveways after a big snowstorm. We're prideful as we relate stories of adventures we had driving to work or picking our kids up from school during a major storm. These tales of adventure often describe long and elaborate detours we developed to circumnavigate impassable roads, the leadership prowess we exhibited when supervising a team of family members and neighbors in their effort to extricate a vehicle from a ditch, the superb driving skills we called into play to coax a vehicle to the top of a slippery hill, our successful effort to jump-start a stubborn vehicle, our rescue of stranded passengers from a disabled car.

Yes, winter in Aroostook County is an adventure, to be sure! You either love it or you hate it – and if you make your home here, let's hope you love it.

The People

People here tend to have high ethical standards and a strong sense of community.

In some ways, living here is like stepping back in time – in a good way.

People care about their neighbors, and they are genuinely friendly. If somebody says they'll come by your house sometime to visit, they actually do it! If there's illness or death in a family, community members want to help – they step up to make ad hoc arrangements for transportation and child care; they organize a benefit event to raise money for the family in need.

Residents of some other parts of New England have a reputation for being aloof when it comes to new people in the area. Not so here. I can say without reservation that people in my little town have welcomed me with open arms. I'd lived here for only a few months when I received invitations to Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas dinner!

Many folks in this area enjoy (indeed, insist on) a pace of life that's slower than the pace of life elsewhere in our country.

The children I've met have manners, and they address adults with respect.

People enjoy socializing. A visit to the post office can be a social event. I know our postmistress by name, and she knows me. Same with our mail carrier. Same with our UPS driver. Same with the man that delivers heating fuel to my house.

This is a place where quite a few people don't have satellite TV or cable TV, and some people don't watch TV at all. It's not that TV service isn't available, and it's not that these folks can't afford TV – it's just that they don't want TV. Some parents eschew TV because they believe it's a negative influence on their children. (I think they're right about that.) Others forego TV-watching simply because they'd rather read a book, or visit a neighbor, or sit on their porch and enjoy nature.

Residents of this area seem to have more than the average amount of common sense. For example, the real-estate bubble and burst had almost no effect on home prices here. Why? Because financial institutions in this area refused to participate in the sub-prime mortgage market. Their refusal to become involved helped keep home prices at a reasonable level.

Contrary to popular belief, many people here are well educated.

TO BE CONTINUED...

