

# Diversity the rule on Mt. Shuttle

By Jesse Roman  
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Most Stoweites barely notice it. Some may have no idea it even exists.

But every day of the winter, the Stowe Mountain Road Shuttle makes 33 round-trips — starting at 6:40 a.m. and continuing until 9:30 p.m. — from the Commodores Inn in the lower village to the base of Stowe Mountain Resort.

People of all shapes, sizes, ages and nationalities — usually wearing various forms of snow, ski and snowboard gear — cram onto the bus, which makes 10 stops at points along the way, ferrying people between Stowe's quaint village and the base of Vermont's highest peak.

With a combination of locals, tourists and foreign workers, the shuttle might be the most diverse gathering of people anywhere in Stowe.

Chantal Gayed, 20, of Paraguay waits patiently in front of the Akeley Memorial Building Monday afternoon, clutching a plastic bag full of groceries from Mac's Market.

She's been in Stowe for two weeks now, just the beginning of her three-month-long excursion from her landlocked tropical home in South America to landlocked, snowy Stowe far to the north.

Gayed is here to work as a lift attendant at Stowe Mountain Resort. She's staying at the Foster Place, a small hostel where many foreign student workers live.

"I wanted to come to the mountains and live in the snow," says Gayed as she hops on the bus to head back up the Mountain Road to Foster's. She's seen snow before, but in Paraguay, where temperatures rarely dip below 50 degrees, she hasn't seen much of it. She plans on skiing for the first time next week.

"I like it here; I like the people, it's really nice," she says, smiling, filled with the freshness and excitement of her new home.

Jenna Burkhardt, 16, of Hershey, Pa., likes Stowe, too. She and her friend Shelly Hope, also of Hershey, are taking the bus back to the Burkhardt family's vacation home after a short shopping excursion to the village.

The family has owned the house in Stowe for several years and always comes up for the holidays and for school vacations.

"We ski and shop in town and in Burlington," Burkhardt says, in between sending text messages to her friends. "We all really like it here, because it's so laid-back."

"I really like it here a lot," says Hope, 17, who is visiting Stowe for the first time. "It's so pretty here with all of the mountains."

Not everyone on the bus is a tourist. Allen Foster of Stowe rides the bus a couple of times a week to get to his bartending job at Cactus Café.

"I live by the Alpine Mart, so it's pretty convenient," Foster says.

Right now, just after 3 p.m. Monday, Foster, Gayed and the two Hershey teenagers are the only people on the bus headed up Mountain Road. Most people are already at the Mountain and getting ready to head home.

After a few stops, as the bus makes its ascent up Harlow Hill toward Mount Mansfield, the only people left on the bus besides this reporter and a photographer is Manuel Zamorano, 25, a student from Chile.

"I'm working at the hotel, waiting for a job as a dishwasher," Zamorano says in broken English. "That is my main job, but I have a bartending job, too, that I'm training for."

Zamorano attends a university in Chile and, by coincidence, came across Stowe on a Web site as he was trying to figure out where to spend his semester abroad.

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“My brother, three years ago, went to Bolton Valley and he had many friends that told him (Stowe) is a very good place to snowboard,” Zamorano says. He’s an avid snowboarder on his home mountains in Chile and thought: Why not give Stowe a try?

As the bus nears the entrance to the Mountain, Zamorano is just moments away from making that picture on the Web site come to life.

At about 3:30 p.m., the bus reaches the base of the ski area, Zamorano leaps off after a quick goodbye, and suddenly a whole bunch of people with skis, boots and boards hops onto the bus to go home after a full day on the slopes.

The mood on the suddenly packed bus is upbeat — almost all these people are on vacation, after all — although some grumble a bit about the weather.

“We came (to Stowe) because we heard about the incredible conditions and they’re tremendous, with the 60-degree weather yesterday and the extremely icy trails today,” says Cooper Fallek, 20, of New Jersey, laying the sarcasm on especially thick.

Fallek, who is here with his parents and his sister, is a first-time Stowe visitor. The family has been going to Killington for the holidays for many years but, fearful of warmer weather and less snow there, the family decided to go farther north, to Stowe, where Fallek’s father skied a long time ago.

“My dad hasn’t been here for 20 years but I’ve heard many a story about how good it is,” Fallek said. “It seems nice. Hopefully the weather will get better.”

The Memme family of Beamsville, Ontario, also hopes things will clear up. Mike and Leslie Memme and their two young children spent nine hours in the car Sunday before finally arriving at the Green Mountain Inn.

Last year, the family stayed at Smugglers Notch and had a great time, but wanted to try something new this year, so they came to Stowe.

“The (skiing) conditions were so good last year that we came back looking for the same,” says Mike Memme. “And the Canadian dollar was so strong compared to the American dollar that it was a very attractive to us.”

So far, that hasn’t exactly panned out — the Canadian dollar has declined since August, when the Memmes booked the trip, and the ski conditions, because of freakishly warm weather during the weekend, were lackluster at best — but they still have a week before they head back to Canada.

“The skiing is not great right now, but the town is really nice. It has been a good experience so far,” says Leslie Memme, hardly concerned about the weather at the moment.

As the bus rolls into town, just a few people, including the Memmes, remain. The driver pulls over near Maplefields and everyone hops off and disperses in various directions. The bus roars south on Route 100 to the Commodores, to begin its journey all over again.