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Tranquil treks, boutique shopping just north of city

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright, Globe Correspondents
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Blanketed in snow, Harold Parker State Forest is a wonderland of towering pines, scampering mammals, and frozen ponds. Amazing to think that the city of Boston is just 25 miles to the south. This 3,500-acre park is an enchanting snowscape in winter, but bring your inner Girl- or Boy Scout along — it's easy to get lost. On a recent visit, we meandered off the trail, following deer tracks and the long, loping prints of the snowshoe hare. The only "people tracks" we encountered were our own.

Not familiar with this forest? No worries; it's virtually unknown to those outside of the area. Sophisticated Andover is better known for its eponymous prep school and a slew of snazzy boutiques. Meanwhile, neighboring North Andover has farm stands and a rural vibe; think of it as Andover's country cousin. This time of year, these north-of-Boston towns offer an easy escape for those who like tromping in snowy woodlands, boutique shopping, American art, and digging into a hearty breakfast.

STAY

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the stately 30-room **Andover Inn** (4 Chapel Ave., Andover, 800-242-5903; www.andoverinn.com, from \$119) is located on the 500-acre campus of Phillips Academy. Guest rooms, done up in traditional style, offer niceties like Frette linens and Keurig coffee makers, along with free Wi-Fi. Breakfast isn't included in a stay, but there's an on-site restaurant, Samuel's. Parking (nearby) is free. Andover also has a few chain hotels. Among them, the pet-friendly **Homewood Suites** (4 Riverside Drive, Andover, 978-475-6000; www.homewoodsuites.com, from \$109) gets high marks for its spacious rooms and amenities that include a pool,

hot tub, and fitness center. They offer a complimentary breakfast, and dinner (basic fare) is served Monday to Thursday. Those who prefer **Marriott's Residence Inn** (500 Minuteman Road, Andover, 978-683-0382; www.marriott.com, from \$125) won't be disappointed in the Andover property, with its swimming pool, warm cookies at check-in, and free hot breakfast.

DINE

Love a great breakfast place? You're in luck — each of these towns has a homey hotspot to indulge. **North Andover's Good Day Cafe** (19 High St., North Andover, 978-688-6006, www.mygooddaycafe.com, from \$4), located in the renovated East Mill building, does a bustling trade with stratas, quiches, and scones (and, at lunchtime, sandwiches, soups, and salads) plus seasonal treats like pumpkin cupcakes and eggnog muffins. There's no table service here; order at the counter and be prepared to wait. A hole-in-the-wall called **Shawsheen Luncheonette** (3 Lowell St., Andover, 978-475-9750; from \$4) is Action Central in Andover, with kitschy-cool tie-dyed décor and a breakfast/brunch menu that offers toothsome fare like spicy pork hash, cinnamon-y French toast, and their signature Fiesta dish with corned beef hash and eggs. The only downside: finding a parking spot here can be tough, unless you visit at an off-hour. For a hearty dinner that isn't the same-old, same-old, make your way to **Yella Grille** (16 Post Office Ave., Andover, 978-749-0011; www.yellagrille.com; dinner entrees from \$17.) Tucked away on a side street in Andover, Yella offers modern Mediterranean cuisine with a Lebanese tilt (understandable, given that chef Carlo Berdahn is Lebanese.) The kibbeh lebneay is a true winter warmer; kibbeh is paired with braised beef and caramelized shallots in a garlic-yogurt sauce. Despite its strip-mall location, **Grassfields Steak & Seafood** (207 N. Main St., Andover, 978-475-7996; www.grassfieldsandover.com; entrees \$14.99 and up) claims a devoted fan base thanks to tasty, well-priced entrees like lobster pie, baked stuffed shrimp, and grilled steak tips. And we have to give a shout-out to family-owned **Casa Blanca Mexican Restaurant** (1070 Osgood St., North Andover, 978-683-1177; www.casablancamexican.com, from \$11.25), near Brooks School, where we often fill up — and fill the bellies of famished soccer players — with warm, salty tortilla chips and chunky salsa, and Mexican food that is bright and flavorful without being overwhelmed by mounds of gooey cheese. Other locations of Casa Blanca have sprung up (including one in Andover), but we're partial to the original, run by the Vargas family.

DURING THE DAY

As mentioned, **Harold Parker State Forest** (305 Middleton Road, North Andover, 978-686-3391; www.mass.gov/dcr/parks) is a stellar place to embrace the snowy beauty of a New England winter, with 35 miles of trails and logging roads. Parklands spread to Andover, North Andover, North Reading, and Middleton, and include forests of hardwood, hemlock, and white pine that encircle 11 ponds. Strap on a pair of snowshoes and ramble, keeping track of your turns because it's easy to get lost in this 3,500-acre park. Another fun place to tromp is **Weir Hill Reservation** (park alongside Stevens Street, North Andover, 978-682-3580; www.thetrustees.org/weirhill), where a pretty footpath traces the shore of 592-acre Lake Cochichewick. Climb up to the 200-foot double drumlin, and follow it into woodlands and along the lake shore. Feeling energetic? Make it a Trustees of Reservations two-fer, and visit the 700-acre **Ward Reservation** (Prospect Road, Andover and North Andover; 978-682-3580; www.thetrustees.org/ward), where 14 miles of trails link three hills. A bit of climbing rewards you with sweeping views from the Merrimack Valley to the Boston skyline.

Feeling more artsy than outdoorsy? Explore one of the most important collections of American art in the United States at Phillips Academy's **Addison Gallery of American Art** (180 Main St., Andover, 978-749-4015; www.addisongallery.org; free.) The gallery, closed Mondays, holds more than 17,000 works in all media, dating from the 18th century to the present. Names like Hopper, Prendergast, Calder, O'Keeffe, Pollock, and Stella are represented; the Addison also has a strong photography collection that spans the history of the medium, with in-depth holdings of works by artists including Walker Evans and Eadweard Muybridge.

By the time you read this, post-holiday sales will likely be in full swing at Andover's boutiques. Top stops include **Izzy's Emporium** (21 Barnard St., Andover, 978-475-0194; www.shopizzys.com) for outfit-making accessories and cool indie labels; **Sole Amour** (10 Post Office Ave., Andover, 978-409-1541; www.soleamour.com) for gorgeous shoes, jewelry, and handbags curated by owner Stephanie Siple; and **Dress Code** (2 Elm Square, Andover, 978-470-0300; www.dresscodestyle.com), where big name designers like Diane von Furstenberg share the racks with up-and-coming fashion labels. Check out the newly opened outpost of **Tobey Grey** (9 Main St., Andover; 978-783-3131; www.tobeygrey.com), a favorite address for lovers of high-end denim and the shop's own "affordable luxury" line of denim, cashmere, tops, and jackets. Other shops we like include the **Andover Bookstore** (89R Main St., Andover, 978-475-0143, www.hugobookstores.com) with its homey fireplace, and the **Andover Shop** (127 Main St., Andover, 978-475-2252; www.theandovershop.com), a time-honored destination for "traditional clothing" (read: preppy garb) for gents.

AFTER DARK

Set in a renovated mill building, **Jaime's** (25 High St., North Andover; 978-655-4735; www.jaimesna.com) is a cozy place to settle in to watch the game on one of the numerous HDTVs, try a craft cocktail, and sample the "burger of the month." The food — featuring appetizers, soup, salad, sandwiches, and (really good) burgers, plus a few entrees — is better than you'd expect, and the vibe is convivial. Just this side of dive-y, the **Park Street Pub** (40 Park St., Andover, 978-470-4543; no credit cards) is the go-to joint for cold beer and karaoke, darts, and trivia contests. And who doesn't love a spot with free popcorn and a jukebox? If you're looking for belly laughs, check out the roster of live acts at **Johnny Pizzi's Lots of Laughs Comedy Lounge** (946 Osgood St., North Andover, 978-687-1789; www.lolcomedyounge.com; most shows \$20), formerly Chuckles, at the China Blossom Restaurant. Headliners like Steve Sweeney, Lenny Clarke, and Tony V. are booked on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the year.

The Andovers are located about 25 miles north of Boston. For more information, visit www.northofboston.org.